

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our tradition and our imagination. Amen.

- Earlier this week I saw a post on social media that resonated deep within my soul.
 - It was one of those posts that you read and initially laugh at, but then that laughter turns into wincing because there's an element of truth behind the humor that cuts a little too deep.
 - The post in question was shared in a group full of Pastors, Deacons, and Seminary students who are all between the ages of 20 and 39.
 - And, this is how it read: "Pastors go into their first call thinking that they're going to change the world, but then almost get fired for trying to change the bulletin."
 - Yes it's a humorous, tongue-in-cheek observance of how churches, Lutheran churches especially, tend to be resistant to change, but like I said, there is an element of truth behind the humor.
 - In the comments of this particular post there were well over a hundred personal stories of pastors recounting the reasons they were fired or nearly fired.

- The reasons given ranged from printing the phrase “Love your neighbor” on church promotional material (because it was deemed too political), to switching coffee brands from Maxwell House to Fair Trade.
- There were some remarkably petty reasons shared within that thread but the vast majority of stories, I found, could be boiled down to a single phrase:
 - “But we’ve always done it this way”
 - By no means is this a recent phenomenon.
 - Growing up as a child of an ELCA pastor and Youth Leader, I heard many stories of people growing increasingly upset because my Dad or Mom had attempted to do something differently than how folks had grown used to doing it.
 - And, to be fair, tradition is one of the pillars of our faith. We would not be the community of believers we are today if we up and got rid of the way we do things because we deemed them to be too dated.
 - However, there is something to be said for discerning when doing something a certain way is a life-giving tradition, and when it might no longer be relevant given the context at hand.
- And, as our scripture readings from today point out, we are not the first, nor will we likely be the last group of faithful people to struggle with doing things differently than how they had been done.
 - Today’s readings work in sort of a 3-act narrative across hundreds of years

- First, the Old Testament reading from the book of Isaiah
 - A section which specifically comes from a period of time when Israel was returning from the Babylonian exile
- This passage then, serves as a reminder of how the people are to live faithfully, and reminds them of how God has called them to act according to the covenant with Abraham and laws given to Moses
 - According to the prophet, the people are to offer food to the hungry, and care for the needy.
 - And, when they do these things they shall be prosperous and filled with joy.
- The prophet also reminds them that they are to observe the sabbath day, and utilize it to both rest and honor their relationship with God
 - Specifically stating: “If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable . . . then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.”
- Thus ends act 1, we have successfully set the stage with precedent for the observance of the sabbath. It is an important custom for the Israelites as a means of grounding themselves as a cohesive community after years of living in exile.
 - So, act 2, comes not from the 2nd reading, but from the Gospel text, wherein Jesus heals a woman who had been living with a crippled back for around eighteen years, and some religious leaders admonish him

for breaking the sabbath, yet he responds by calling the leaders hypocrites because they do not keep the sabbath perfectly

- What reason is there to keep this woman in her condition, when she had approached Jesus seeking healing, other than, “we’ve always done it this way.”
 - Jesus’ response is pointed and direct, but also an invitation.
 - An invitation to expand how we perceive the world and show up to act within it.
 - Are we living simply according to a list of ways it has always happened? Or are we able to truly see and connect with the needs of those around us, and work to meet them?
 - Jesus was not advocating for the eradication of sabbath observance, but was showing that the needs of your neighbors should take precedence and priority. Sometimes breaking with tradition ends up being the more faithful and loving action.
- Which brings us to act 3 of the readings, the section from the Letter to the Hebrews
 - There’s a lot going on in this letter but what I want to focus on is verses 22 – 27.
 - These verses touch on the fact that Jesus did things that were beyond the scope of accepted norms, and instituted a new covenant in his blood.
 - We remember this every Sunday when we celebrate the sacrament of communion together

- This new covenant in Christ's blood is for all people, for the forgiveness of sins.
- There are no constraints or boundaries placed upon who has access to this covenant of Love that Christ instituted.
 - This in itself was also a massive break from the way things had been done.
 - The customs and laws that Jesus was taught growing up set the Jewish people apart, it marked them as God's chosen people.
 - So to make a new covenant where there are no such distinctions or barriers is a radical break from a centuries-old tradition.
- But, Jesus was not the first to break the mold and do things in a new way,
 - In fact I am of the opinion that if we turn all the way back to the very beginning of scriptures, we find that God has always been about creativity and the shifting of things
 - The creation narrative from Genesis, the story of how all things were formed, is founded upon the breath and wind of a creating and creative Spirit
 - The very first thing that God ever does in Scripture is to look out upon the chaotic void and breathe the Holy Spirit over it.
 - And this world that was created out of the calmed chaos was not rigid and final, but a miraculous collection of relational possibilities

- The Spirit set into motion a world that can shift and flow and grow
- And Jesus breathed that very same creative Spirit into us at Pentecost and through baptismal waters,
 - Grounding us in the tradition as old as creation itself, to create, imagine, and make things that take on lives of their own.
- Even within our denominational tradition of Lutheranism, we are founded on the act of challenging the way it is done
 - Luther and the reformation set a precedent of the Church institution not being intrinsically free from all scrutiny and re-organization
 - And the phrase “semper reformanda” always be reforming, arose from the movement.
- These days, I believe we as a church, as a global body of believers, are being called by the creative Spirit into a moment of deep discernment
 - A moment where the sacred duty we are tasked with is to look beyond “the way it has always been done” to find where the Spirit is pulling us into more expansive, more imaginative, more Christ-centered work in an ever-shifting era.
 - And there are whispers of this movement taking shape within the church
 - 2 weeks ago, the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA took place in Columbus Ohio, and one of the higher-profile resolutions that voting members passed was a memorial to begin the process of reconstituting the ELCA.

- In recognition of the fact that this national body of Church was constituted 35 years ago, the assembly voted to form a committee to examine and review the current constitution of the church, and in 3 years present their findings on what could and should be changed in a new reconstituting assembly.
- Standing in the tradition of Jesus who broke sabbath law to meet the immediate needs of those who followed him and his teachings, and the reformers of the medieval age who questioned the practices of the church at the time, I am encouraged by how this most recent assembly chose to rise to the occasion and do the difficult work of self-examination, to see how we might reimagine and reshape ourselves to better serve a rapidly changing world.
- It is both joyous, and perhaps unsettling to do things in new and different ways, but my prayer is that we might find comfort and promise from the thousands of faithful individuals and communities who have attempted new things before us, not least among them Jesus, whose new covenant gives us new life every day.
 - As this world continues to ebb and flow, shift and start in ways mysterious and unsettling, may we hold fast to our traditions, yes, and may we also know that we stand in the tradition of discerning our neighbors needs, breaking norms when the situation calls for it, and acting creatively and imaginatively.

- This world is changing and we along with it. So may we as followers of Christ, filled with the Spirit of creation, change alongside it, so that the love of God might remain a constant presence in whatever reality is to come.
 - In the name of the one who Creates, Redeems, and Sustains us, Amen.