

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Tom Gehring

August 28, 2022

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

- If I'm being honest, I had a plan for this week's sermon. And, if I'm being honest it was a very good plan.
 - See, with all the themes from today's readings about being humbled in the presence of nobility, and not assuming a place of honor until it is given to you so that you don't risk being put in a place of lower honor, and entertaining strangers, I had this whole sermon routine prepared to perform.
 - I had planned to write a sermon full of gratitude for the opportunity to serve here at Wicker Park Lutheran during this sabbatical summer, and what an honor it has been to step into this pastoral leadership role and accompany you all through this journey while also being accompanied.
 - And the kicker, the climax of that sermon if you will, was going to be me, relinquishing this position of honor back to pastor Jason, and resuming my position of the lowest place of honor.
 - It was going to be very funny, heartfelt, and entertaining.

- But, you might notice that, despite my promise during last week's service, I am once again up here, leading you all in this worship service, completely unsupervised.
- And while I do not fault or resent Pastor Jason for making the medically informed decision of remaining home today that we might all remain safe and healthy as a community, I do slightly resent the situation of not being able to preach that original sermon idea.
 - But, oddly enough, this did get me to thinking.
 - Specifically, the phrase from our Hebrews reading got me to thinking.
 - "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."
- I'm not trying to say I'm an angel, but 3 months ago, I was a stranger. And although I have stepped into this pastoral and preaching role as a leader, I have also been a guest among you.
 - And the hospitality you have all shown me as a guest has made an impact upon my life deeper than I can succinctly put words to.
 - You may know this about me, but I have only been a resident in Chicago for about 5 months
 - Before I was here, I was serving as the solo pastor of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church on the Rocky Boy Reservation of Montana, and had been there for a year and half.
 - It was my first call out of seminary, and a position I had been working towards for around 13 years, ever since I

first discerned my call to ministry back when I was a high school student.

- However, without getting too deep into the weeds of the details of my life, that call in Montana was not a healthy situation for me, and I was suffering through a mental health crisis.
- For all the ways that seminary prepares you for ministry, it does not prepare you for the ways you will question your self-worth and entire identity when your first call ends up falling through and not being sustainable.
 - That was the context I moved to Chicago in, fresh out of a call in which I loved the people dearly, but could not continue serving. Unable to find a congregation to serve in Chicago, and going into an unexpected career shift into chaplaincy ministry.
 - To enter into this congregation as a pastoral presence (even if for a short while), in a new synod, a new city, and entirely new chapter of my life felt significant and, if I'm being honest, a little daunting.
 - But, the ways in which you all as a congregation and community welcomed me in, and allowed me the opportunity show up as a faith leader this sabbatical summer have been nothing short of the presence of Christ to me.
 - You have shown me grace, hospitality, and welcome. And your presence to me has been a reminder that I am indeed called to ministry in this life.
 - What started out as a means for me to connect to the Metro Chicago Synod and fill in for a new colleague while

he was on sabbatical became a poignant and timely reminder of the ways the Spirit is guiding me in this life.

- And for that, Wicker Park Lutheran, I say thank you.
- As I ruminated and reflected on the hospitality you have shown me these last several months, I could not help but see the connective threads to what Jesus preaches from Luke's gospel.
 - Because, while what he preaches is hospitality, as it so often does with Jesus, it ends up looking different than how we might imagine it.
 - "hospitality" in the modern understanding is usually relegated to being about how we entertain.
 - In fact the Oxford definition describes hospitality as "the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers"
 - But what Jesus describes goes beyond that.
 - It's important to note his audience, Jesus is in the house of a leader of the Pharisees for the sabbath.
 - Jesus is among the elite of religious society. To dine with the leaders of the Pharisees for the sabbath is to essentially show up at a networking event of a Fortune 500 company today.
 - And it does not take long for Jesus to start unraveling the very fabric of the event.
 - He notices the guests seating themselves according to honor, status, and privilege and instructs them instead to go and sit at the lowest place, so that they may be invited up to a more honorable position.

- But beyond that, Jesus gives the instruction for when others decide to host events, luncheons, dinners, etc. to not invite their friends, relatives, and rich neighbors in the hopes of earning social status and eventual payoffs for themselves.
 - But instead, to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.
 - Jesus instructs the elite and the aspiring elite to completely do away with the systems that have given them their privilege and status in the first place, and instead, use what status and privileges they have earned to give to those who have none.
- This is hospitality according to Christ, to reach beyond the bounds of how things are expected to be done.
 - The act of including those society might call “the least of these” goes beyond a simple act of charity, and instead advocates for a complete restructuring of how society functions.
 - To live our lives with the same hospitality that Christ preached means to extend our focus and gaze beyond our inward interests, and to discern where the deep needs of the world are so that we might do our part to meet them, so that all people might live in dignity.
- At times, this spirit of hospitality might look like welcoming a stranger into the pulpit for most of a summer and unknowingly reminding them that they do possess gifts and talents for ministry

- But, more often than not, it will look like going further. Beyond simple acts of charity, even beyond the walls of this church building, and into the lives of those that society tries to hide and forget.
- As we go forward from this time of sabbatical summer and into a world that is constantly evolving, I pray that the Spirit might lead us all in the ways of radical hospitality that Christ taught
 - On every level of our lives, may we seek to love those who are forgotten, include those who are pushed away, feed those who are hungry, and liberate those who are imprisoned.
 - And may our actions in this life be so consistently attuned to the love of Christ that the world is restructured in the process
 - May the way we treat one another be such a force of change and goodness, that life itself is shifted into a new reality where we all flourish with and alongside one another.
 - Amen.