

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Please pray with me, may the Holy Spirit guide these words from my mouth and may they be received with open hearts, according to your will, Lord Jesus. Amen.

It was a cold winter night in La Crosse, WI during the freezing temperatures in February 2012. We were inside the basement of a church, not much different than here.

That evening, I was volunteering for the first time with three other people to keep a safe place in that basement for the unhoused people in the city. However, there were rules-like only being able to check in during a certain window of time.

After people checked in and we ate dinner together, the four of us volunteers sat in the hallway of the basement keeping one eye on the room where guests were sleeping and the other looking up at the main entrance that had glass windows and doors.

As we were talking, suddenly we heard. All of our heads move up to see a young man placing his face against the glass looking down at us, pleading “hey, can you please let me in?”

The oldest person there, a seasoned volunteer, declared “no, I’m sorry, check in is only between 7-9pm, and its midnight right now. You’re going to need to find somewhere else to sleep tonight.” The young man’s head dropped down and he turned away...walking back into the cold darkness. Another volunteer said “that’s

not right...we should have let him in." The older man defended his decision, "no, that's the rules. We need to follow them." And I sat and watched this exchange in silence and confused about why things are this way.

It's like in today's reading... "Knock, knock, knock," ("Lord, Lord, please open up to us"); "I do not know you."

Seems like a pretty harsh consequence for being "foolish."

Does Jesus punish those who are foolish, that make mistakes? Like the young man who we turned away that cold February night? I mean he was late, yet I think he was hoping for something, maybe like mercy or grace.

What if he was late to check in that night because he was helping a friend who was overdosing, and he had to use Narcan to save their life, and he was just waiting until the friend was stabilized, or what if he was working at a job until 11:30pm and he wasn't able to make it to the church until midnight? Is that his fault? Was he being foolish?

Let's shift things instead and look at those of us who were already inside, who could maybe be seen as wise. I mean we were well off enough to volunteer, and those guests were wise enough make it in during check-in? We must be doing something right? Yet, something *didn't* feel right, even though I knew what my fellow volunteer said was true in that "we're just following the rules." Yet, that statement was eerily similar to the excuses of the Nazi soldiers after the holocaust saying "we were just following orders."

Which makes me think about how the Remembrance Kristallnacht happened two days ago...It was 85 years ago, where hundreds of Jewish owned businesses,

synagogues, and homes were vandalized and destroyed in Nazi Germany, Austria, and Sudetenland. However, it was more than just property destruction, it was an ethnic massacre, a pogrom, because hundreds of Jewish people were killed over those two days, and as we know, it only got worse from there as the holocaust grew more horrendous in the following years with millions of Jewish people being systematically killed by the Nazi's.

Now, I don't mean to say that this older volunteer who said he was following the rules by not letting the young man stay in the church that night is the same as a Nazi soldier murdering Jewish people in WWII. Yet, it does show us the spectrum of what can happen when we respond to human suffering with indifference and defer our moral action to human authorities and rules.

In our reading from Amos, the Lord had it up here with traditional forms of worship and ritual because God's people, were missing the ethical covenant between one another, things were upside down from what God wanted, where the poor had been defrauded and robbed! Where leadership was corrupt, where justice was denied...God doesn't want us to simply follow the rules of an unjust system where the most vulnerable suffer and are punished.

At the end of chapter 25 in Matthew, our Lord Jesus Christ, is retelling the importance of ethical action towards our fellow humans, "Truly, I tell you, just as you did *or did not do* to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I find it hard to believe, Jesus whose parents were turned away and told "we have no room for you." For him to be born in a manger, a barn, how cold it might have

been during the night in which he was brought into this world...Yet through that cold night, our redeeming hope was born!

You see, Jesus speaking of the Kingdom of Heaven in our Gospel reading today, is not to be examined with our worldly expectations because dare I say that to be wise is not just about making it on time, or volunteering to be a “good Christian,” and it’s definitely not wise to “just follow rules and orders...or stay silent like myself in the face of human suffering.” In fact, I’d say doing those things are examples of what it is to be foolish!

To be wise, is to be filled with the Holy Spirit! *This* is the oil that we need to fill up on, as much as we possibly can! This is how we be wise like the young women in the Gospel, with their trimmed wicks and extra oil. The Blessed Spirit is freely given to us, to liberate us from the sin of indifference to the suffering of our fellow humans.

We receive this Holy Spirit the moment we are baptized, and this Spirit will never leave us. We do have an amazing opportunity in tending this relationship too. We are blessed by the Spirit to strive for justice and peace on this earth! The justice that is spoken about by Amos “let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!” It is by the grace bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit that we can witness the depths of Christ in the eyes of our neighbors, strangers, and even enemies to be moved by the Spirit into action to tend to their needs and speak out against injustice, declaring God’s liberating love for all!!!!

That being said, like the older volunteer or myself who didn’t let that young man inside, we will all be foolish and fall short from time to time, having moments where we don’t answer the door to someone in need, we won’t speak with the person

outside asking for change, we will look away when we someone asks “Por favor ayudar?”

We can get burned out, overwhelmed, and even hopeless by the suffering in this world to where we just want to say “enough,” and go on autopilot and almost be “asleep” to it. These moments can be like the maidens, both foolish and wise, who fell asleep in the parable as they awaited the arrival of the bridegroom, much like the disciples that fell asleep when Jesus was praying at Gethsemane about to be arrested, but as we know, even after the death of Jesus, HE was risen!!! He conquered death!

Hope came renewed and resurrected from the depths of despair. He forgave the disciples and brought them back into a place of glory through His grace, and mercy they’d keep trying to do better being guided by the Holy Spirit. It was their faith given by Jesus that kept them on that sacred path despite their own failings, and despite *our* own failings we still have that same Holy Spirit within us and moving ahead of us showing the Way of Hope in Our Lord Jesus Christ.

We come together to worship our Lord and to be liberated by these teachings of how to be good neighbors and human beings to one another in this sanctuary and beyond these walls.

Recently, my Seminary had its annual dinner with holocaust survivors at a nursing home in Hyde Park. We bared witness to their stories of tragedy and triumph. At the end of the night, we got to ask them questions. One elder told us “I want you to know there were good people too, those who helped us and kept us safe.” Another elder said, “We had underground Jewish fighters, that helped us survive, they helped my mom and I escape. I want that story to be told. Jewish people didn’t

just go to our deaths. We did fight back.” A third elder, who is 102 years old, told us, in response to the question “what’s something important that you want us to remember and take with us to our congregations from what you experienced and survived?” She replied, “Try to do the right thing...It isn’t easy to know what the right thing is though...It’s still important to keep trying to do the right thing.”

Please pray with me, Lord Jesus Christ, we ask that Your Grace be embodied more and more within us, so that our lamps be filled with that sacred oil of your Holy Spirit that will guide us to see You when our neighbors, strangers, and everyone else comes... knocking at doors of our hearts. **Amen.**