Sermon for The Holy Trinity Sunday

June 11, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa 52101

Presider: Pr. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

Preacher: Daniel Grainger

First Reading: Isaiah 55:6-11; Psalm 8; Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20

Dear friends, grace and peace to you from the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.

Five years ago I was sitting in the Center for Faith and Life after chapel in the latter half of April, during my senior year of college, when I got the call. The executive director of Camp Ewalu had called to offer me a full-time job as the director of church relations. As you might imagine, as a senior with less than a month left until commencement, I was absolutely thrilled!

Most of us can recall a time or two when we’ve lived with a great deal of anxiety; the anxiety of not knowing. For college seniors who have recently graduated, it’s the anxiety of waiting while writing resumes, submitting job applications, and scouring the job market day in and day out like the search itself is the only full-time job they’ll ever have!

Getting that job offer to work at Ewalu was a huge relief for me, not because it was my dream job, but because I needed to get away. Don’t get me wrong, it was a great job! I got to work at my favorite place on earth with some of the best people. But I needed to get away from what felt like was a pretty big failure.

When I transferred to Luther in 2010, I chose to study religion because I wanted to prepare myself for seminary. At that point in my life, I had worked several summers at a bible camp, and each summer I felt more and more a sense of call to ministry. And more and more it felt like I was being called to be a pastor.

To be honest, this wasn’t completely out of nowhere. I don’t remember the context, but sometime around the age of ten, my mother leaned over to me in church whispered: “I think you’d make a good pastor.”

This spring, Allie and I, joined many in the Decorah community in attending the evening lecture by Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. During the Q&A session of the lecture, Pr. Nadia began to dissuade a young adult from considering seminary.   
She claimed that the church doesn’t need more pastors who were church youth group all-stars, who went to camp every summer, who went to a Lutheran college, who worked as camp counselors, who know a few Ole and Lena jokes… Rather, what the church needs more, are pastors with real-world experience.

If you lost sight of me during the lecture, I was sinking down in my chair, because I was involved with church youth group. I went to camp. I went to a Lutheran college. I was a camp counselor. I was involved in college ministries. And yes… maybe I do know a few Ole and Lena jokes.

I do agree with Pr. Nadia – the world needs pastors with real world experience... but people don’t necessarily have to go out looking for real-world experience. In being human, being present, being vulnerable – life will give us experiences.

During my first semester at Luther in 2010, my dad died unexpectedly of a heart attack. I was meeting with my Greek tutor in the lower level of Preus library when I got that call.

Now, in addition to the experience of deep grief and sadness, I had more questions and doubts than I knew what to do with. During the remaining two years at Luther, I studied, I cried, I prayed, and I tried to makes sense of it.

How can I possibly serve a God when I feel cheated? Where is God in the midst of pain and suffering? What good is prayer?

These questions were not unfamiliar to me, but now so very raw and real. The religion courses weren’t just theological lectures and discussions in my courses, but the key to understanding why.

Still, each semester I had a growing list of questions and doubts. But I thought if I was to serve the church, I needed to know – I needed to be sure in faith – to have the answers. So I tried. I tried so hard. All to justify my reasoning for going to seminary…and in the end, against going to seminary.

When it became clear that the answers I wanted weren’t possible or easy, I walked away. I walked away from church; I walked away from a God who would not give me answers, who stayed hidden, who eluded me.

Looking back now, I’ve come to realize that, like a weed imposing itself over the sprouting seed, I was strangling the innate call I felt within me. I was strangling it because I wanted to fully understand it. I wanted to know why.

I don’t know about you, but I suck at honoring mystery. Ask me what I KNOW. Don’t ask me what I don’t know!

In the reading from Isaiah this morning, the Lord says, “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

Seeds can’t flourish by taking them out of the soil to examine each day. We have to trust that the roots are taking, and that it will grow. New life cannot flourish without some degree of surrendering to the mystery of the resurrection.

For me, I received new life when my father passed in the relinquishing a life lived on stand-by. Most of my life, my dad’s health was poor, and I was always on stand-by in case something happened. Fear has a myriad of ways to immobilize us; to keep us from participating in God’s vision for us and for our world. I’m certainly not fearless, but I’ve practiced being at peace with the God beyond my understanding.

This spring, I received my acceptance letter from Wartburg Seminary. For the sake of time, I’ll have to spare you the many the details of my discernment in the past couple of years. But what I can tell you is this: I still feel like I don’t have any answers.

In a column called “Born Baffled: Musings on a writing life”, author and activists, Parker Palmer, writes as advice “*allow yourself to be baffled, which shouldn’t be hard to do. I mean, what’s NOT baffling about ourselves, other people, and the world we co-create?*” Indeed.

My mind can NOT stop, WILL not stop seeking understanding. It’s just the way my brain works. But that’s okay – it’s okay to ask questions, to wrestle, to have doubts, to be angry, and to seek understanding. But I’ve discovered that, in allowing ourselves to be open to the mysteries; in letting go of the vastly hidden God that we will never fully understand; a new life opens before us.

There’s a lot I don’t understand, but God calls to us from the cross, God calls to us from the empty tomb, and God calls to us from within the mystery of resurrection. It is a call from death to life – it is a call into living as Christ did. It is a call to the embodiment of God’s abundant love for the sick, the poor, the widow, the immigrant, the marginalized, the oppressed, the persecuted, for the doubter, for the skeptic, for ALL the world. Fortunately, THAT call is not contingent on how much we know.

Dear friends, in relinquishing the need for all the answers, I think we can begin to live and participate more fully in something that starts to resemble the kingdom of God.

To close, I simply want to offer a blessing from Jan Richardson, called *Blessing the Seed*.

I should tell you

at the outset

this blessing will require you

to do some work.

First you must simply

let this blessing fall

from your hand,

as if it were a small thing

you could easily let slip

through your fingers,

as if it were not

most precious to you,

as if your life did not

depend on it.

Next you must trust

that this blessing knows

where it is going,

that it understands

the ways of the dark,

that it is wise

to seasons

and to times.

Then—

and I know this blessing

has already asked much

of you—

it is to be hoped that

you will rest

and learn

that something is at work

when all seems still,

seems dormant,

seems dead.

I promise you

this blessing has not

abandoned you.

I promise you

this blessing

is on its way back

to you.

I promise you—

when you are least

expecting it,

when you have given up

your last hope—

this blessing will rise

green

and whole

and new.