

Sermon for Sunday, June 28, 2020 - “The Church Has Left the Building”

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Click [here](#) to read scripture passages for the day.

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

As Jesus sends his disciples out into the world, he tells them, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.”

This means that when we welcome the people Jesus sends to us, we are welcoming Jesus himself. As we welcome them, we experience Jesus present with us, and we come to know Jesus more fully. We are rewarded, we are blessed, as we welcome.

When has this happened for you? When have you experienced Jesus’ presence, when have you come to know Jesus more fully as you’ve welcomed others? When have you been blessed by the experience of offering welcome?

There are so many stories of this happening through Good Shepherd Lutheran Church.

In the early 1980s, Good Shepherd came to know Jesus more fully as the congregation welcomed refugees from Southeast Asia. Members served as host families, made space for English classes, helped to teach those classes, and welcomed these beloved children of God as valued members of the congregation. One Good Shepherd family moved to the basement of their home so that a Hmong family of seven could live on the main floor. This family, and so many others in the congregation, were blessed with deep friendships that taught them so much about life, faith and compassion. One member continues to be in close contact with the people she welcomed back then even though most have moved to bigger cities now. Her understanding of scripture has been deepened and broadened and she regularly brings these insights to Good Shepherd Bible studies where others are richly blessed by them.

Today as the congregation welcomes new immigrant neighbors, we continually see the face of Jesus in *these* beloved children of God. We’re reminded that when Jesus was an infant, his family had to flee their country because their lives were in danger. They became refugees in Egypt. Jesus’ ancestors also went to Egypt when there was famine in their own land as we hear in the book of Genesis. They were immigrants seeking better economic conditions. Being in relationship with immigrants is helping us to remember that accompanying and advocating for immigrants isn’t a partisan issue but rather a biblical mandate stated throughout scripture.

Many Good Shepherd members have welcomed guests of Luther College as well as high school and Luther students into their lives and their homes for years. Many did that this spring as Luther closed due to the virus. As you’ve welcomed these guests, you’ve reported growing in faith, patience, compassion and good humor. You’ve become more Christlike through the experience of making space for others. Many of you have been rewarded with lifelong friendships.

Good Shepherd has also been blessed through a welcome to those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. Back in 2007, Good Shepherd was one of the first congregations in our area to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation, thereby extending an intentional welcome to these beloved children of God. This congregation now experiences the presence of Christ through these beloved ones and their powerful leadership in the congregation.

And each week when there is worship in Good Shepherd's building, a wide welcome is extended to everyone. All are welcome at Christ's table. After worship, that welcome continues during Fellowship Hour. A great feast is spread for all guests. You can sit down at any table and be welcomed into conversation. People don't stay in set groups talking only with those who are like them. You can have great conversations with a wide range of people.

This congregation welcomes others so beautifully. It's what I love most about Good Shepherd. Throughout your history, you have come to know Jesus more fully as you welcome those Jesus has sent to you.

That makes these days when the building is closed even harder. It's not just that members can't gather together. We also can't welcome others into the building and to the altar. We can't welcome guests to sit at a table together breaking bread after worship. We also can't invite many people to come inside our own homes. This is so painful.

We know we *are* welcoming many guests into this online worship space. Some who haven't felt welcome in church buildings are now able to share in worship. If that is the case for you, I pray that you know God's welcome of you today and always. As a congregation, we are living out Jesus' call to welcome in new ways and for that we are grateful.

Still we long for the day when we can once again welcome people into the building and into our homes, offering them a cup of cold water or a great cup of coffee. We long to gather in the place where we proclaim in word and deed and with a big sign in the entryway, "There is a place for you here." We long to live out Jesus' call to welcome that we heard in our Gospel reading today.

Yet beloved of God, this Gospel reading still has an important message for us now.

Jesus speaks these words about welcome to his first disciples and to us as he sends us into the world. They are part of the instructions we've been hearing the past three weeks - instructions about how disciples are to take part in Jesus' work of disrupting and healing the world. Jesus ends these instructions saying whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. Which means, Jesus isn't just calling us to welcome those he sends to us. He is also sending us out to others to be the face of Christ for them. We are to help others out in the world to experience the love of Jesus.

The mission of the church of Jesus Christ isn't to get people into buildings. The mission is to share the good news that the crucified and risen Jesus is present and at work in the world. The mission of the church is to be the hands and feet and face of Jesus in the world. We are fed and serve and love others out in the world. We are to make space for others in the world in our daily lives. We are to help people know that there is a place for them in the very heart of God. Gathering in the church building, at the altar, equips us for that mission, but it can never take the place of that mission.

In this time of COVID-19, many are commenting that the church has left the building and that this isn't all bad. This pandemic time and the Gospel reading today each remind us that we aren't called to get people into the pews.

We are called to be the church at work in the world.

We are called to welcome those Jesus sends into our lives.

We are called to be the face of Jesus in the world by how we live and speak and serve others,
even in these strange times, especially in these strange times.

We are called to make space for others.

This is a daunting task, yet we are not alone. Jesus sent the first disciples out in pairs as we heard a few weeks ago. He sends us as a congregation now.

Together, we do Jesus' work in the world in all the places Jesus sends us.

Together, we are given the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out Jesus' mission.

Beloved of God, Jesus makes it clear that there is a place for you, and all people, in the very heart of God.

You are sent to share that good news in the world. Thanks be to God.