

Sunday, April 26

"Stories on the Way"

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First Lutheran West Allis

Grace and peace to you in the name of God our Loving Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Many of you know that last week I was bonding with our Council President in a unique way, because we both were quarantining, while Heidi's daughter Nicole was battling with Covid-19. We had good news at the end of last week that Nicole was improving and her family was not sick. And after checking in together daily for ten days, I found out that I had tested negative the same day that Heidi completed her 14 day quarantine. And so we were finally free!... Free to do what though...basically we kept doing exactly the same thing we had been doing and that all of you have been doing! But now we could at least have a little company.

Since Sarah and Paul and I couldn't be together for Easter, we said we would celebrate Easter together when I could be with them again. Which meant delayed gratification for a six-year old, which I really appreciate! Paul not only put off gifts and Easter eggs, but also a special roast dinner he had requested. So the day after the news that we could get together, we finally watched the Easter Service from First and we also went on a long walk together.

Paul had convinced his mom that he should get one last ride in a stroller and so we pulled on our facemasks and had fun with it. We told Paul he should say something really adult sounding as we passed people on the river walk. And his mom suggested he say, "This stroller really reminds me of Newton's Third

Law!" [For those of you that don't remember what Newton's Third Law is, I'll give you time to pause this and check!]

Of course, the point is not understanding it but sounding like a very smart baby in a stroller. And Paul may or may not have gotten the joke, but loved yelling it with all the energy of a professional actor and amateur practical joker! "This stroller really reminds me of Newton's third law" over and over again even if people had headphones in or weren't paying attention from their 6 foot distance.

We found out a lot of people did not know what Newton's law was or why we thought this joke was funny, but it was a way for us to breathe free for a bit and laugh together. I love that poem on the statue of liberty that talks about the huddled masses yearning to breathe free as an essential fabric of the American people... and we all are yearning for those moments that remind us of what it is like to breathe free. Things we may have taken for granted, before we were told we should stay in our house... pretty much all the time. It's hard for all of us, but I hope you are all finding ways to remember small freedoms, like laughter in the face of a trying situation.

On the way back on our walk, Paul ended up getting way deep, which he also has a tendency to do. He was thinking about Easter it turned out. He said that when Jesus was alive people thought he was just a regular guy, but afterwards people started seeing him as God's son.

I miss children's sermons, you know. Maybe we can figure out a way to do a children's sermon next week. Kids are so wise and see things in such a fresh way even if it challenges our normal way of doing things and thinking about things. They really breathe new life into old topics.

We couldn't figure out if Paul was challenging the divinity of Jesus or having some other deep philosophical thought, so we engaged him in conversation about it. Earlier in the walk, Paul had demanded that I tell him a story, and for the life of me I couldn't think of one on demand, so I hoped he would forget until I could think of one.

But Paul bringing up this concept of Jesus being seen as a regular guy offered made me realize I had a story for that ready to go. And it gave me an opportunity to see our gospel lesson as the story I could tell. We quickly realized Paul wasn't being accidentally sacrilegious but helping us see a side of God in Jesus we maybe hadn't fully seen before. Even though my first response was defensive—and I wanted to say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, Paul, Jesus wasn't just a regular guy—he was special"—I realized Jesus probably wouldn't be offended that Paul thought he was a regular guy. I think Jesus loved being that regular guy. And I figured that out in a new way in the telling of this story to a six year old.

And so I told Paul the story of Jesus showing up with these two disciples on the road to Emmaus. We talked about how Jesus could have shown up with a big show or just told them that he was risen and then taken off to do something else, but Jesus wanted to walk with these two guys for awhile. Maybe he missed them and missed the feeling of being just a regular guy? Maybe he wanted to listen in on what other people were saying about him. And we couldn't help seeing the humor in it! Paul and I laughed thinking about why they didn't recognize him. Did he have a mask on? Did he have a funny mustache? Was Jesus, like a celebrity on vacation with a hat over his face just trying to look like a normal guy. Or did the disciples just not expect to see him, because they thought he was dead and wouldn't come back?

Sarah and I talked to Paul about what irony meant and how the audience hearing the story from Luke knows what Jesus is doing and who he is, but the disciples aren't in on it. Paul loves magic and has been performing magic tricks at the end of his mom's online classes recently. Irony is kind of like a magic trick where the magician knows what the illusion is, but the audience doesn't. Those hearing Luke's story, know the disciples are walking in the presence of the light, even though they are still wandering in the dark trying to grasp at something to make sense of what happened to Jesus... while not seeing him right in front of them.

Paul and I also talked about how interesting it is that the early Christians were called the Way, because Jesus called himself the way. The people reading Luke's witness about Jesus would have likely considered themselves part of this community known as The Way and so they would have heard this story with a bit of a smirk, as the person that they know was the Way also walks on the way, with these disciples. And Jesus even makes it seem like he was going to keep going on the way, maybe showing us that God will be with us on the path in front of us too.

As Sarah and I walked and talked with Paul, I could almost see Jesus walking with a smirk on his face. Like someone playing a long form practical joke on his friends. The way I do with my friends. The way Paul and I do with each other. That is *the way* of God too apparently. That is the type of God we have. A God that could be up in a throne, but comes down to earth. Comes down to us, whether we understand the physics of it or not. Jesus wants to be with us. Jesus wants us to see him... but maybe not right away if that makes the reveal sweeter, and the laughter louder at the end.

One big word I didn't use with Paul is *incarnation*, but that is what this is all about. We have a God that becomes *in carnate*. God *in the flesh*. And God with us. Deeply with us on the way. On all of our paths, wherever they may lead.

We have a God who speaks in the language of stories. Stories that will always reveal something a little different based on who's telling it, who hears it and when and where it's told. Thank God we as a church can hear stories together and ask each other what they mean. Maybe an eighty year old and eight year old may hear things differently... or maybe they hear things the same and there's some magic in that too! When we gather around scripture together and hear these powerful stories in different ways and we share that and tell our stories, we all grow in our understanding together.

On Wednesday, First's oldest member turned 92. And I talked to Laverne just before our council meeting, where Heidi had invited council members with kids to be on the zoom call so they could see us and we could see them. And the kids of the congregation knew we cared about them and valued them.

One of the things I love about First, and that made me want to come here, is that the people here immediately came across as "down to earth". And that's who Jesus is too. A down to earth God who doesn't need to impress everyone. He just wants to get to us, and be good company for us on the way. And Jesus helps us to be good company for each other too and invite others into that good company.

God talks to us in stories and still does. Jesus talks to us with a wink and hug of love when we most need it. And Jesus is still with us on the way. Inside and outside. Wherever we go... and even when we need to stay. Jesus is God

wanting to be with us. And he is excellent company. Jesus is God joking with us, loving us, and showing us the way. Paul's right. Not the Apostle Paul of Tarsus but six-year old Paul of Milwaukee, many people, during Jesus' time, may not have seen him as God... mainly because he ate and drank with people that they were sure were far too regular for God's company.

And many today still don't understand how Jesus can be so normal and so special at the same time. But that's some of the magic of the Way. Where expectations are flipped and surprises abound. Where love wins on a cross and out of a tomb. Easter is God being with us, because he can't help joining us on the way even if we don't get it, even if we don't recognize him right away. Jesus is God continuing to show up and meet us where we are at. In the company we are with. Everyday, and whether we see him or not, Jesus is with us. Thanks be to God!

May the peace that Jesus gave us fill our hearts and minds with his Easter joy.
Amen.