

Sermon May 24, 2020
"The Genius Thing about Jesus"
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Grace and Peace to you in the name of God our loving Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Hello again, First Lutheran! Not only is it great to be back in the church again for a service taping and sermon, it's also great to be able to preach again! I made room for two bishops on Pentecost and Holy Trinity Sundays, and I hope you enjoyed that reminder of the connection with the larger church. If you haven't seen the final hymn for Pentecost Sunday it's worth going back for!

Things are quickly changing with the phases of reopening, and leaders at First are trying to find ways to safely gather again. We are coming up with a plan to meet outside and will continue to assess meetings and ways of worshipping from there. We are committed to keeping people as safe as possible and limiting any transmission. But we know many people will chose to not meet in person for health reasons and we are also committed to providing online options so that we all can stay connected in a shared worship experience.

In my last sermon, I talked about how Jesus' prayer for his followers was a lot like a travel log or photo album as he remembers all the people he met who shaped his ministry. Everyone he meets has their lives changed. This Sunday we hear about the disciples who are sent to change lives. Others, and their own. And in the story from Exodus we hear that the Israelites become a treasured people through entering into a covenant with God.

These are stories of the importance of relationship and trust in communal and individual change. Without trust and a relationship, change is unlikely. It's

also unlikely that humans will change unless they create a new pattern of behavior. Which takes time and effort, and a lot of YouTube videos and Self-help books.

What's interesting about hearing about the Israelites accepting and affirming their covenant with God, is that this law, was not God saying we need to keep you the same, or box you in through punishment. That's the way we may understand or have been taught about law in the Bible and law in our world. But this covenant and law is for the purpose of transforming a people. God says that obeying God's voice and keeping the covenant will transform them into a "treasured possession", a "priestly kingdom", and "holy nation". It's framed with love and relationship.

We think of law as what keeps things the same or peaceful and what protects the norm, but God's law and covenant uses a relationship and love of God to shape the lives of God's people.

There are identities, values, behaviors in the life of a community that keep things in place, but the Godly identity, values, and behaviors are ones that lead us out to be change agents and to be changed. This is who Jesus was and the kingdom he invited people into—And it's usually the one we plug our ears for. They say a good teacher can be seen in the student. When Jesus sends his disciples out, he doesn't say "go with your gut" or "trust your instincts" (Like Yoda says to Luke Skywalker) but he says listen to the Spirit and gives them a way of being that will transform them and their interactions with others.

One of the things he tells them to covenant with him about, is not to bring very much with them.

⁹Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.

Why does he tell them to do that? One of the reasons we think of is so they can travel fast, but more importantly, if they had too much of value with them,

they would be thinking about those things, those possessions instead of the work they were called to do. Not having everything you needed also meant that you would need to ask for help if you didn't have something. Now this is a genius move by Jesus. Would you expect less?

But it goes against so much of what that culture and our culture preach to us. Jesus preaches a different lesson and gospel. Instead of going out with everything you need so you can be completely self-sufficient—like Americans going camping in their souped up SUVs—Jesus says go out with little. Jesus knows this will set them apart from other travelers, who go out with all the gear. The brilliance of that is that the disciples rather than going out with all they needed to not burden others, are sent out, with Jesus knowing full well that they will need help on the way from strangers. The genius move of Jesus.. that doesn't look like a genius move to the culture around him or us.. is that Jesus doesn't call perfect people that have everything they need already. Romans says "while we were still sinners" Christ died for us. That doesn't mean that training and equipping is unnecessary, we should ask the questions that help us know who we are first. That's what Jesus does with the disciples and hopes it sinks in. But really people going out into the world asking questions and trusting the Spirit is his main recipe for the good news and church spreading.

We live in a culture that doesn't ask for help much anymore. Remember when we used to ask people questions? What do we do now? Now we google it! But it is when we ask questions and when we have needs that we have the opportunity for relationships to be formed. If you have it all figured it out... If you already know who you are and what you want, then you might feel satisfied and comfortable, but you may not be living an abundant life. And that's what Jesus offers. Abundance doesn't mean we have everything and don't need anything. Christians' abundance comes from helping each other and not being afraid to ask for help. That's how we as individual's grow and it's how communities grow. Not by figuring it all out on our own but by

forming partnerships and asking for help. That's why I'm glad we heard from the bishop of our synod and the ELCA the last couple weeks. Not because they have it all figured out but because we are in a covenant with thousands of other churches that are there to help each other and support each other, and work through problems together. It's a gift to be in community.

There are places and communities focused on what they don't have and there are communities that believe they have all they need. But the communities I want to be a part of are the ones know they have more together. The ones that aren't afraid to ask questions or be vulnerable. That's how trust is formed, that's how relationships are formed, and that's how God's kingdom is formed.

That may go against a lot of your own culture or what you were taught about how to live in this world. It may go against a "do it alone" culture that many churches have. But I think that is a covenant that we are called into when we follow Jesus, just as his disciples did.

I am just learning about First Lutheran. I don't know all of you and I don't know how to pronounce all your names and I don't know all your stories yet. But I am curious about each of you and I am curious about what God wants us to do together.

There is always tension when a new pastor arrives, where the people that don't want to change, teach the pastor the norms of the community to follow and the people that want things to be different, often want to change everything at once, or for the pastor to do everything at once! I've experienced a little of that already and will experience more of it. But I know this— God does call us to be change agents in our own communities and in the world— and that takes work and it takes a willingness to agree to change behavior.

We just went through one of the biggest societal changes in behavior we ever have had, with stay at home orders and social distancing across the

globe. It's not over yet, but we can reflect on that and think about how it has transformed us. We have recognized where we have needed help and we have recognized what we miss about being in community. We have worn masks, even when we haven't wanted to, in order to keep our neighbors from getting sick. We have shown that change is possible, even among the stubbornest of the stubborn. It's been hard but it's an accomplishment to see what it means to be in a covenant with so many other people. Never has the whole world been so united in behavior and in desire for human connection.

It was a need to respond and a threat that did this. Human beings have been humbled and scared no matter what nationality, race, or political or economic allegiance. We have formed a community through it. We've needed each other and we have recognized the value of each human life as we grieved the losses.

As I think about my time at First, I know I want to be a change agent and I want each of you to join me. I can't do it alone and none of you can either—and those that have tried may feel like they've been hitting their head against a wall! But when churches are willing to do that work together they have something to say to the world and they are ready to listen to what the world has to say to them. And I know that also begins with understanding our covenant with each other. What are the values we hold and where is God leading us? Are they the same as eight years ago or four years ago, or three months ago? We know the world has changed dramatically in a matter of months with covid-19, and in the last two weeks the world has changed again, as we think of laws of our land as transformative in a new way. We can't predict the future but we know there will be change. What do we hold to in the midst of change, what values help us respond, what truths help us lead? I was called to First after writing a vision for how I saw my leadership could fit with First's need. I appreciated that you were asking for help and now I am

asking for your help as we live into this work together. This is an excerpt from that proposal:

- 1) I want to lead the congregation in reimagining First Lutheran. Just as Luther reformed the church in his time by going back to the gospel and the discipleship of the early church, we are called to participate in a reformation and renewal process at First. During the next three years of this term call we will be a “reforming” congregation. I will use my interim ministry training and experience to facilitate an assessment of First Lutheran, following the basic framework of interim ministry and mission exploration, so that we can understand our changing community, culture and context and create clarity of identity, values, narrative, and invitation to those that are not a part of our community yet. We need to ask why we exist in order to know the type of community we are reforming into and how to connect to other people who will see the community as valuable.

We have covenanted together in those efforts and that means we are in the fields of the kingdom together. When Jesus saw how the leaders of his communities did not speak to the needs of his times or his people, he said to the disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” And then he sent them out to model the kingdom and multiply the fruits of the field through service and healing, asking the needs of the people they meet and responding. When we all are connected in a common vision, values, and identity as a congregation we are invited into the work of the disciples and we are ready to invite others into the kingdom of God.

God treasures you and God wants you to know abundance. God calls on you to be workers and change agents of the kingdom. It would be hard to do by yourself. Luckily, the genius thing, the Jesus thing, is that we get to do it together!

--May the peace that passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.