

LELC Pentecost 9

Good to be back... official report of CWA business next week.. Catch our breath. Sermon prep plan today was a little risky. Not good at writing so far ahead. Picked out hymns, prayers, pictures before I left. Plan was to experience the week at CWA in all its fullness (boy, howdy, was it!) Then, Saturday, before I started my drive home, planned to re-read the texts for the day and ponder them while I drove – with hopes that by the time I got home I’d have something to sit down and write (and just ‘fess up and apologize if it was still half-baked.) Well, here’s a report on how that went.

make a motion to approve or not.

I actually didn’t read the texts right at the start. It was too dark in the parking garage. So I stopped at Brookfield for sugar and caffeine and read them there. Then I got back on the road.. The first thing that was sticking in my mind was the Hebrews text, especially: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” and “All of these died in faith without having received the promises, **but from a distance they saw and greeted them.**” These words speak to the deep sense of “already but not yet” that living our faith is. These words brought to mind the deep and troubling paradox of two very prevalent realities at the Assembly.

On the one hand there was the profound and wonderful esprit de corp. The baptized had gathered, coming from far and wide, sea to shining sea; for one purpose – to be the church, to do the work of the church. There is, by design, a great diversity among us – far greater than the average Lutheran congregation on any given Sunday morning. And yet there was a unity, a community we created. It was most evident, I’d say, at worship. Every day we gathered in the morning. We sang ALL kinds of music. We’d sing along with the unfamiliar words or clap to unfamiliar rhythms, and still catch the energy of someone else’s well-loved song of praise. And we’d come to the table, streaming from all sides with our hands extended to be fed the bread of life, to taste the wine of peace. It was amazing, and Holy Spirit-filled, every time.

On the other hand there was an equally un-wonderful tension, almost to the point of animosity. Part of it stemmed from Bishop Thomas-Breitfeld’s resignation. As is so often the case, in the absence of information, rumors, half-truths, and misinformation were rampant. (Thank you FB). But I was there and saw the sheer joy at her installation, the beginning of her ministry as bishop – especially on the part of her African descent brothers and sisters. Why would anyone think there

would be anything else but equal anger and grief at its ending? This was only exacerbated by the inadvertent use of a very offensive image in worship. The fact that it was unintentional made it no less offensive. The deepest apologies were as timely as possible, but that did not undo the harm. Healing will take time, it will take doing better, much much better.

These things made me wonder what was going on in the community that received this letter we call the letter to the Hebrews. Scholars think it was probably written to the early Church, in Jerusalem (maybe). Some suggest it was written before the fall of the Temple, so mid-60's. ^{Jerusalem, first gen during} About the same time as Paul's letters. Long enough for the group to grow in include a wider variety of people – maybe some of those Samaritans, both slave and free, men and women, rich and poor. Maybe they had had some unfortunate incidents, some mis-steps. Was it getting too hard to be part of this new community of mutual care? Were some being tempted to turn back? Give up on the grace of Christ Jesus and its power to ^{include and thereby} transform the world's same-old, same-old into something new and life-giving? What, one wonders, was going so badly among them that the author talks about Abraham as having been "as good as dead"? Because that's how it feels among us sometimes I think. Our human sinfulness, our limited ability to be empathic enough, to love enough, gets us every time. With our efforts alone we are as good as dead.

More than a few feel "as good as dead"

Even so, ... Even with all the broken-ness, and less-than-ness, and falling short, at this Assembly – from a distance – we saw, ^{esp. of worship} we greeted, the kin-dom, the community of life and love in Jesus' name, that God desires for us all.

Now, along about Watertown, I got to thinking about that Old Testament text: that promise to Abraham about his descendants being as numerous as the stars. What a wonderful promise, especially considering it is being given to a very old guy who is, as yet, still child-less. We know how the story turns out: today those who consider themselves descendants of Abraham and Sarah are as numerous as the stars. But they didn't see it. Sarah bore only Isaac. From whom, with Rebecca came Jacob and Esau; and then the twelve sons of Jacob, and so on and so on. The descendants of Abraham have known struggle of every sort along the way: slavery, exile, diaspora, the Holocaust. The path to the fulfillment of that promise has never been straight, or easy.

So these words to Abraham brought to mind the wonderful day, Friday, when we kicked off a year of celebrating the 50th anniversary of ordination of women; as well as the 40th anniversary of ordaining a woman of color and the 10th anniversary of

ordaining a openly-partnered lesbian. Friday evening we heard from Rev. Elizabeth Platz, the first woman to be ordained in the LCA, Nov. 22, 1970. But Friday at worship any woman pastor who wanted to, was invited to process. At the beginning of worship we came streaming in. Hundreds of us – of every age, size, shape, color, and every other what-have-you. We were like stars, too numerous to count. I know I wasn't the only one shedding tears of joy and disbelieving, some of grief, some of gratitude. For all the stories that were told so far, there are so many more to tell. It's going to take a year to do it. The path to progress has been slow, and winding. But we are becoming more and more open to God's promise that the Spirit is poured out on sons **and** daughters.

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Now, along about the loop around Madison I got to thinking, what should I do with that Gospel text (and that picture of the burning lamp on the front cover)? That text is all about be ready, have your lamps burning. I was pondering the idea that Luke's Gospel has upped the ante on Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew it's all about having enough oil for when its time, time to live into a new reality. Luke is straight up "keep those lamp burning, folks." And I was going to go for an ending to this sermon about keeing the lamp of God's love for us burning through the long night of sin, which will – one day – give way to the dawn. But.. I'm not gonna preach that – because of what happened when I got home.

Some of you know that our granddaughters, Sarah – who is 7, and Leah – who is 5, usually come over to G'ma and G'pa's house for a sleepover on Fridays. Since I was in Milwaukee there was no sleepover Friday night. But Sarah and Leah (and their bikes) came over to our house yesterday to hang out with G'pa for a while. When I arrived Sarah was finishing up a book and Leah was getting ready to try riding her bike in our driveway.

It helps to know that their driveway at home slopes slightly down to the street and is quite short. The only safe-ish place for them to try riding is a short stretch of dead-end street not far away. G'ma and G'pa's house on the other hand has a nice long driveway. There is a nice gentle slope down from the garage, a bit of level and then it's nicely uphill for a ways. It also helps to know that both Leah and Sarah are at critical junctures of learning to ride a bike. Leah, the 5-year-old, has finally gotten a real bike with pedals and not too long ago helped put on the training wheels. Sarah, the 7-year-old, has graduated to a larger bike with hand brakes - and no training wheels.

Once G'pa got done adjusting Leah's helmet she was ready to give our driveway a try. At first she was having trouble staying with the pedaling. She kept losing her balance whenever she tipped from one side of her training wheels to the other so she would stop pedaling and put her feet down. So, G'ma goes up the driveway a little to cheer her on. Once Leah would start out toward me, I'd call to her, "Pedal, pedal, pedal, pedal...." The side effect was that she would look toward me instead of looking down, and voila', she would be pedaling and balancing, with no training wheel on either side. We did this both directions a few times, G'ma shouting encouragement, guidance and affirmation. Pedal, pedal, pedal, pedal, Look at me, look at g'ma...." and of course., "You did it! Yay, Leah!!!"

You got it! You got it. You're doing it. . . .

Then Sarah came out, her helmet duly adjusted. So I had Leah park her bike and take a break so Sarah could have a turn. Gatorade was promised. Now, helping Sarah turned out to be a little trickier. First of all, she was a little more timid and tender of heart. She needed G'pa to run along behind, holding her, a couple of times. But my job was the same, to stand and call out, "Pedal, pedal, pedal,... look at me, look at me." Sarah was getting it. We talked about how the body learns and develops body memory so that pretty soon her body would just remember how to do it and she wouldn't have to think about it anymore. "Yay, Sarah!" too.

But then I realized Leah was sitting in the garage on a spare patio chair, heart-broken and crying. When I asked her what was wrong she said she was sad that I was cheering for Sarah instead of cheering for her. And I just scooped her up and hugged her and thought to myself, "Oh, heart of my heart, how can you ever imagine that I can love you any less because at this particular moment I am showing the same love and affirmation I have for you to your sister?" Which brought to mind one other aspect of the Assembly. And it's kind of a confession.

this next part is

There was an effort to lift up certain groups during the Assembly. It's the usual list: Hispanic-Latino folks, African-descent folk, LGBTQIA+ folks, the under-35 or 40 folks. At the end of the worship Friday when all the women clergy processed, the photographer was asking for all the younger clergywomen to gather for a picture. Those of us who no longer fit that bill said to one another, "So, what should we do, 'all the old codgers over this way to head to a bar'?" It was mostly unspoken, but I'm sure there were others who felt like me. I can only imagine that white, middle-aged male pastors must think, "What about us, do we even matter?"

The ~~the~~ ones who fought the first battles,

So common:

At the very end of the last session a representative of the LGBTQIA+ group asked for just a few more minutes to bring their one main issue to the floor instead of

having it referred to the churchwide Church Council. That motion was defeated, 75-25%. Our hearts were breaking for them because we all knew they would be feeling like they, and their concerns, didn't matter.

I think this is a very human part of life together. From our youth to old age, we ask in many and varied ways, "Do we matter?" Sometimes it comes in the form of "Are we enough? Are we good enough, or talented enough, or valuable enough to be cared about?" Sometimes it's straight up, Does anybody love me, really love me, just the way I am?" And I imagine that God hears our crying and thinks to Godself, "Oh, heart of my heart. Even if it is not being manifested in this exact moment, how could you ever imagine you are loved any less?"

While L, S, Gpa, Gma sat sipping some Gatorade, thought of how
I imagine God gently reminding each one of us, "I have given you yourself, in all its unique special-ness, so in your own special way you can live out the love with which I love you." I imagine God patiently explaining to us, "It's going to be a life-long learning project, to love the way I love you. You will ever and always be in that tippy, learning-to-ride-a-bike stage. But the sacraments, the gifts of water and bread and wine, will help you practice. They will help you get the hang of welcoming, and gathering, and sharing. ~~It~~ ^{It's} ~~giving~~ ^{gathering} ~~and~~ ^{wheels} sharing. It will give you a communal body memory.

And we will wobble along, as we of the Lutheran branch did this week at our Churchwide Assembly. But, thanks be to God, as we try and fail, and try and fail, and try again, I also imagine God is ever and always saying to us, "Pedal, pedal, pedal, ^{You're doing it!} ... Look at me... Look at me. Look at Jesus. Look at me" such that, every now and then, in briefest of moments we find the balance of loving and the joyous freedom and life it brings to us all.

And, I like to remember that at the last, ^{park the wobbly bike this mortal frame} we will come to know the sweetness of ^{Go get some heavenly} God's encouragement, and grace, and love that waits in all its glorious fullness for us all. God saying to us all, "Yay, you!" Amen. ^{Gatorade}