

I want to start today by describing a little bit of my process when it comes to writing a sermon.

It always starts on Tuesday. The more time I'm able to spend in the assigned readings during the week, the better. On Wednesday I participate in a text study with pastors in this cluster. By Thursday the temperature in my office starts rising. I've spent some time in the text and usually have the beginning of an idea, a seed, so Thursday is usually when I get down to writing.

I take as little credit for what comes as possible, for the movement of the Spirit is responsible for what becomes the Sunday sermon. I could say more about that but suffice it to say that the more I lean into that movement, the better things seem to go. On a good week, I've got a solid rough draft by Friday afternoon and spend Saturday polishing and practicing my delivery.

On a bad week though, I get to Thursday and I haven't gotten the Spirit's nudge. So I take things into my own hands and start writing. Sometimes the good news presents itself as I write, but sometimes not. And by the time Friday rolls around I have a lot of writing but I'm saying very little. I've got a collection of ideas and some nice writing, but it's not a sermon. That's not a terrible place to be in the process unless I find myself attached to what I have. I've gone over it a hundred times, and though the Spirit's continued to move, I've been swatting it away in favor of my ideas, my writing, my desire for greatness...

The work of writing changes into the work of climbing out of the well-worn rut I've created. It's a rut with steep, slippery walls. This is when I start praying.

In our gospel reading, Jesus encounters the rut the disciples are in. Having given them a second description of what's coming for him, he finds them carving the same old groove they were in when he first called them. It makes you wonder, was Jesus telling them about his impending arrest, suffering, death and rising to shock them out of that rut? If he was, it didn't work. They're confused by what he says so they go right back to what they know - competition, comparison: "Who among us is the greatest?"

This is not a harmless argument. In fact it's serious business. In an article on this text Karoline Lewis points out that what sits at the heart of a question like this is *comparison* - not who's the greatest but who is *greater than who*. By asking about the argument Jesus holds up the reality of such an argument - that to be great requires another to be "deemed less than." Lewis writes, "Jesus names the disciples'... deepest desires - desires that have nothing to do with the expansion of the kingdom of God and everything to do with the advancement of the self." Greatness.

Could seeking after greatness as the world defines it actually produce all those considered "less than"? I would argue that it does but I won't take this time to defend that. Self-advancement may just be the "human things" occupying Peter last week for which he was rebuked. These are the human things that form the rut the disciples are continuing to carve this week. And these are the human things we get caught up in ourselves at times.

Telling the disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" Jesus was flipping their script: You want to be great? The ones being left behind matters. The least and last are leading. In what Jesus is saying, "the easily forgotten... take center stage." Children, not Caesar - the last shall be first.

Children, and raising them, was not even a peripheral focus for families in the first century. I heard Nadia Botlz Weber describe this week how children were viewed in the first century. “Miniature adult replacements,” is what she called them. But until they were adults (self-sufficient anyway) they were needy, underfoot, neglected creatures - more like “mongrel dogs” than the sanitized, sentimentalized children of Norman Rockwell paintings. Any distraction from the work of day-to-day survival wasn’t an option, so children were viewed more as a burden than a blessing, if they were considered at all.

And this is exactly who Jesus takes and puts among his disciples in the wake of their dispute. Probably dirty, hungry for food and affection, safety, this child **Jesus takes in his arms**, embraces, welcomes and says, “Whoever welcomes and serves one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not (only) me but the one who sent me.”

I wonder if the disciples were “with him” as he spoke about the first being last and servant of all. I wonder if they were coming around to the idea - “yeah, I could serve some of these others, at least the well liked and respected disciples” - until Jesus put this child down in their midst and wrapped them up in his arms.

I'll be presenting the Adult Forum after worship today. This will be your chance to hear about the organization receiving our Special Offering for September - The Center for Changing Lives, Liberia. You'll see pictures of these easily forgotten members of society - Liberian orphans. I'll tell you about the organization and my friend who started it in order to serve these kids. You've got the opportunity this month to support CCLL and the amazing work being done there.

I mentioned pictures. I have a lot of them, but not nearly as many as I wish I did. This is because, the few days we had with these kids, we were busy! We were learning about the organization, getting tours and seeing the teachers in action. We were meeting the kids, learning their names and playing games. We played A LOT of games. But the pictures I do have, I wonder what your reaction will be to seeing them.

When I learned a day or two after we arrived (before meeting the kids) that our group was going to be "running program" at the Center for a few days, I was really nervous. When I learned that I was assigned to the older kids (13-15 year olds), I was reallllly nervous. But I soon learned after meeting them that these poor Liberian orphans were just kids - resilient, playful, funny, brave, traumatized, broken, lovely children - every one of them. They were way less concerned about their "status" as orphans than we were. They just wanted to meet these funny, nice white people and play.

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

I think part of what Jesus is up to here is simply about interrupting us. We get wrapped up in the business of life, in being successful, of being good Christians and writing good sermons. We are good at finding and making these deep ruts, but these ruts don't lead where Jesus invites us to follow. So he interrupts us, wraps us up in his arms and says, "Child of God, here is a different way."

Believe it or not, following Jesus can become something of a rut too at times. It can get to be really serious business, void of things like joy and laughter. It's serious, hard work following Jesus after all. The argument of the disciples, even as they are following him, even as harmful as such an argument can be, it could have simply been the closest thing at hand to distract them from the drudgery of the path. But Jesus claps us all awake and invites us to a deeper kind of following.

It's not much of a segway, but what I'm getting at here is that this path involves play. Play. The joy and laughter of those Liberian children as we ran around was an experience of the path Jesus wants for us all. Taking all the ways we compare and evaluate and judge each other and especially ourselves is something Jesus is dying for us to lay aside. For it allows that Spirit to blow, loosening something deep inside us, allowing us to shed the "High Stakes" pressure of everything, literally freeing us to respond. And that response so often, without any effort at all, takes the shape of service: Helping people, the last and the least.

Serving your church and serving the larger community of Red Lodge is motivated differently when play has a place. "At play in the fields of the Lord" is a phrase my Dad tosses around. Letting go of my deep desire to measure up and perform loosens up my sermon writing and even makes it fun.

That is part of the path Jesus bids us follow. Our baptism makes it so. We are made free in baptism from our need to prove ourselves, from worldly affirmation, from greatness as the world defines it. We are plucked up out of our ruts and put down in the midst of a world in need of servants and, wrapped in the welcome of Christ himself, we find new life and joy and play responding to this welcome, this service, this gift.

One year ago tonight, I was standing in the courtyard of Christ Church Lutheran in the Longfellow neighborhood of Minneapolis. My family was all present in the crowd of 14. There were 150 or so online, and Pastor Erik knelt to light the “New Fire” as we gathered around it to begin. Everybody was wearing a mask, even my sister - the only one permitted to sing. And before the sun finally set, I had been ordained.

Looking back on a full year of ordained ministry, I remain grateful to this church who called me. Central things have presented themselves - compassion, communication, keeping each other safe, and taking the call of Jesus seriously. Play is an easy thing to fall off that list but play sits at the heart of this work - not “my work” but the work of following Jesus, the work we are all doing together.

So as I look ahead to another year of ordained ministry, as we look ahead to another year of following where Christ leads, may we never be too wrapped up in the work to remember the life to which he leads us - the new life of freedom, abandon, and play through which the work is done.

AMEN