

I like to think there is absolutely no truth to this story: nevertheless, I have been told during my younger years that I referred to Pastor Doug as God, the pastor who led my home congregation during its supposed hey-day, when the pews were busting at the seams with worshipers on a Sunday morning during the 1980's. I doubt the attendance played any role in my not-so-mature theology at the time; more than likely it was his voice, his stature, his white robe, a combination of all the above. I don't know the exact reason, but if Paul were to continue his First Corinthians rant that we heard this morning, and asked me back then, "What then is Pastor Doug?" Sorry, but he was God to me.

Yes, I was young. I was naïve. I had not gotten to my reading and comprehension with the commandments just yet, with "thou shalt have no other gods before me," and the like. Now, come Confirmation, I believe I had finally put two and two together that the clergy were human after all, or, at least, were supposed to be. But, then, for the second year of our catechism classes, my home congregation of St. Paul's had just called a new pastor, and Pastor Jerry definitely reeled *me* in with his personality and humility. I was not quite to the level of thinking that he was God incarnate, per-say, but I'm sure I didn't think he was too far below that holiness stratosphere. So, I no

longer belonged to Pastor Doug. Instead, sorry Paul, but I still belonged to Pastor Jerry, not because of his voice or stature or the white robe or whatever biblical or Lutheran theological knowledge he possessed. It was because he cared. He treated me and all of us adolescent immature junior high youth like we were just as valuable as any of the other pew-occupiers on a Sunday morning. He showed an interest in us, he wanted to know about our interests. He was just different. I most certainly belonged to Pastor Jerry.

And yet, I understand psychologists point out the immense importance of the teenage years, and how that time in our life plays a significant role in shaping who we are going forward, for better or worse. And yes, Pastor Jerry was there for some rather pivotal moments: (now don't tell the Bishop this, but Confirmation wasn't that big of a deal for me). Nevertheless, he was the one who had to stand at the pulpit the Sunday after September 11, when me and all my classmates had to face human mortality in the most horrific way, watching the terror unfold on television while we sat in stunned silence in our classrooms. Pastor Jerry had to make some sense of that, when, come to think of it, our own theology was desperately wanting some holy depth for the first time in our young life. He, also, preached at my grandfather's funeral. And yes, he was the one who started to hint a little more assertively over the years

that I should consider seminary, which, of course, I could never do. I may not have thought pastors were God in-the-flesh anymore, but still, at that time, I firmly believed the clergy had to be perfect, morally upstanding people, a near-holy level I have yet to reach myself.

And, to this day, I still remember coming back home from college, when I was doing the college thing and wrestling with what I wanted to do with the rest of my life and all, and there it was on the table: a letter from Pastor Jerry to the members of the church that he was taking another call. Clearly, he did not check with me first, because that should have never been allowed to happen to begin with. That wasn't part of the perfectionistic standard I had in mind for him. Evidently, the pastor was human, after all. He had family. He, too, had to wrestle with God in figuring out what to do. He was just like imperfect struggling-on-the-journey me.

Yes, it took some time to put together that I did not belong to a certain pastor. Other people, other just as precious children of God, came along and revealed that to me. I belonged to something, some one, some Holy one, much bigger, much more to the perfect holy level. Of course, we could still use a fair share of down-to-earth personal touch when it comes to our faith journey in whatever form that takes. There are such people in this life who have

watered and planted the moments that forever impact relationships not just with God, but amongst sisters and brothers in Christ throughout the world. And then, such people come and go, some much sooner than we are ever prepared to accept, but God has this rather insistent tendency to stick around through all the transitions, all the wait-and-sees, all the fears over what the future holds for us, the church and the entire world.

So, no matter how captivated we may have been, we have never belonged to any mortal person; only to God, only to the One who truly knows us to our very core, and loves us far more than we can ever love ourselves, and more than anyone else ever will in this life, way beyond anything we can ever imagine. We belong to Christ, we belong to the One who is still convinced that we are worth dying for, we are worth coming back to life for, that no matter how lonely the days may get when so many others come and go, this perfect, insistent on being Emmanuel, holy One will never leave our side. We belong to Christ, so much so, that no matter what we do with all our days, wherever this journey takes us, nothing will ever convince our Lord to let us go. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!