



In case you did not know, nowadays, anyone who wants to serve as a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the ELCA), of which we are a part of, there is a bit of a screening process involved from psychological testing to criminal background checks. Thankfully, a few speeding tickets, evidently, did not forever doom my chances. But it's also a good thing they didn't go as far back as elementary school, because...I was not exactly the most well-behaved boy, to say the least. However, it was not so much in the classroom as it was on the bus.

With where we lived just outside the city limits, and going to a school out in the countryside, I was often the first one on and the last one off the school bus each day, which only meant even more time to get myself into trouble. Now, I did not start off that way, but when I got to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, after a few years of riding the big yellow transportation vehicle for seemingly hours on end, I must have grown into the naïve mindset that I could get away with absolutely anything.

By that time in elementary school seniority, I had my seat at the back of the bus, furthest away from the grown-up adult, whose name was Suzy: meaning, from there, I had my coveted best chance to get away with absolutely anything. I started by using a paper clip to poke a hole in the seat in front of me so that I could put my trash inside of it: the trash of candy wrappers or whatever other random assortment of snacks (none of which were allowed on the bus, of course). I did not stop there, though. After class was done for the day in the actual elementary school building, I would take advantage of any opportunity to sneak away to the room with the vending machine that was supposed to only be for the teachers. Arrogant me didn't care, obviously, as I got my orange Sunkist pop to take on the bus, hidden in my bookbag to avoid Suzy's eyes.

Except, soon enough, I don't know what happened, but I started to realize I was not being overly "cool" with my immature behavior. I wasn't being respectful to Suzy, who had driven around others in my family as well. So, one day when she pulled into our home driveway and I made that long walk with no one else around from the back of the bus, I broke down and confessed to Suzy all that I had done. Understandably, I lost my back seat privileges for quite a while, to say the least; but Suzy, for some reason beyond my minimal understanding of basic human decency, never attempted to use my past mistakes to shame me, as I so richly deserved, for the rest of my bus-riding days. Instead, I actually grew in my respect for her, realizing she was not just a random person who got us from our house to school. For some reason, she truly cared about us, and thoroughly desired to play a role in shaping us all for the better.

Suzy came to mind when considering that one verse from the Psalm this morning: "Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; remember me according to your steadfast love and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord." Granted, I understand eating snacks and drinking pop on a school bus may not be a huge deal in the grand scheme of the human sin department, but I have always wondered about the beginning of that verse. I often wonder if it would be even more powerful if God did remember the times when we messed up: the times when we acted rather selfishly instead of caring for others, for starters. I wonder if grace would be even more mind-boggling, if God could stare all those seemingly countless imperfections down, and still insist on love and mercy for us, no matter what.

I have a feeling that even though Suzy never mentioned it after I did my young version of public confession to her, I have a feeling she still remembered my shortcomings as I took my front-row seat in the early morning hours. And yet, it didn't stop her from selflessly caring. It didn't stop her bright-as-the-morning-sun smile. It didn't curtail her contagious laughter that could fill the whole bus and then some. I also have a feeling God has a rather perfect memory as well, knowing full well the times when we did not live up to the standards as disciples of Christ to nourish relationships with one another and

the Creation. Nevertheless, God will insist on not seeing us as mistake-ridden sinners, as if we do not do nearly enough to earn God's love. God will insist on seeing us as the most precious children, no matter our age, no matter our holiness background check. Can it really be possible that, regardless, God will remember us according to a steadfast love that is completely beyond our human comprehension?

Oftentimes this season of Lent turns into figuring out a certain behavior we can focus on, a certain ritual we can master for 40 or so days, to somehow "restore" our relationship with God, as if it was ever broken to begin with. So, again, the church offers this annual reminder: nothing you do during this season of Lent, or through any timespan of your life, for that matter; there is nothing you can do to make God love you any more than God already does. No matter the mistakes you have made, no matter the sin committed, it can never stop God from remembering you with the same mind-boggling divine care that took our Lord to the cross to show us all what true love looks like then, now and forevermore. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!