

SERMON – Rev. Paul Gehrs

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ELCIC National Office

I am speaking to you today from Treaty One Territory: the land of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, and homeland of the Métis Nation.

The ELCIC acknowledges that its buildings and ministries, from coast to coast to coast, are on traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples. Working for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, respecting Indigenous Rights and learning from Indigenous wisdom is essential to climate justice and renewed relationships with the land.

My name is Paul Gehrs. My pronouns are he/him, and I serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Justice and Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations at the national office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. Thanks for joining me today: to reflect on, and listen for, God's word to us for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost.

Every year, from September 1st to October 4th, the global ecumenical community observes the *Season of Creation*¹ as a time for prayer and action to care for our common home. Each year a Celebration Guide is produced; the information I share with you about the season draws heavily on the 2023 guide. (You can learn more at www.SeasonOfCreation.org.) Season of Creation is a time to renew our relationship with our Creator and all creation through celebration, conversion, and commitment together.

Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I proclaimed September 1st as a day of prayer for creation for Orthodox Christians 1989. In fact, the Orthodox Church year starts on that day with a commemoration of how God created the world.

The World Council of Churches was instrumental in making the special time a season, extending the celebration from September 1st until October 4th. October 4th is the feast day for St. Francis, and many traditions view St. Francis as an inspiration and guide for those who protect creation.

The 2023 theme is Let Justice and Peace Flow,² based on Amos 5:24: *But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!* The Guide comments:

We are called to join the river of justice and peace, to take up climate and ecological justice, and to speak out with and for communities most impacted by climate injustice and the loss of biodiversity.

¹ Resources can be found at <https://seasonofcreation.org/>

² Season of Creation Celebration Guide, Let Justice and Peace Flow, 2023

For me, every gathering of the church includes the purpose of listening for a word from the Holy Spirit. The disciples with whom I gather help me to listen for the Spirit's call, and they inspire me with their stories, ministries, wisdom, questions, challenging questions, commitment, and love. Dare I say, sometimes I have to do some internal work to embrace the hard questions as a gift.

I also believe that God's ongoing formation and transformation is part of the life of discipleship. It is one of the reasons I gather with the church. Dare I say transformation is not always comfortable and sometimes I have to do some internal work to embrace transformation as a gift.

The Season of Creation invites us to pay attention the climate crisis. Multiple voices, including the earth, are crying out. Climate justice deserves our attention and our discernment.

The Season of Creation invites us into deeper relationships with all creation. We need to be in respectful, living relationship with four-leggeds and two leggeds; with swimmers and fliers and crawlers; with rocks and trees and plants; with earth and air and water. We need to engage all our relations as neighbours, friends and family.

The Season of Creation invites us honour worship and prayer as part of the journey to healing and transformation. Worship opens us to the Holy Spirit and helps us to muster the courage act boldly for the love of creation. In water, bread, and wine, we are blessed with grace. In beauty, image, movement, and ritual, the Spirit acts.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus asks "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter seems to knock it out of the park with his answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

However, I wonder if we need to let the question be the question.

After all, Jesus does tell the disciples not to give the answer away.

Perhaps each one needs to wrestle or play with the questions.

Perhaps our first job is to listen, rather than to give answers.

Today when I hear Jesus ask, "Who do you say that I am?", these things come to mind:

Jesus is the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

When my daughter was born, I remember her tiny fingers. They looked so fragile, and yet they were resilient enough to have just made the journey through the birth canal. Beings are fragile and resilient. Jesus came to live among us, in fragile resilient flesh, and with the reality of God in his being.

Jesus wandered around, plucking grain to eat, and pointing to the lilies, the birds, the fig trees.

I remember an eagle flying over a Vacation Bible School group in rural Manitoba: circle above the lawn, the church, the cemetery, the people. A blessing of love.

We are invited to pay attention to creation and to creation's witness to the Source of all love.

Jesus is the one who told religious leaders that if the people didn't sing praises, then the stones would shout out. Creation knows how to honour God. I can learn.

Jesus is the one who stopped and asked, "who touched me?" when a desperate woman received healing. Many said "it's too hard to tell" or "don't bother," but Jesus took the time to hear the story.

To his first disciples, Jesus said, "follow me." And they left everything and followed him.

I do wonder sometimes what I am being asked to leave behind, so that I might follow more faithfully.

What do I need to leave behind help care for creation?

What do I leave behind to help the community heal?

What do I leave behind to hear the Spirit more clearly?

What do I leave behind to see the fragility and the resilience in every neighbours?

Sometimes with Jesus the questions are not any easier just because you know the answer. And sometimes the questions get just get harder.

I do know I am glad that I am following Jesus. And I am glad that I am following with you.

I look forward to hearing how you respond to the questions you hear, with prayer and action.

Let Justice and Peace Flow.