



August 28, 2022

*Pentecost 12*

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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**Eastern Synod**

Greetings friends! My name is Michael Pryse and I am the Bishop of the Eastern Synod. It's a privilege to be with you today and I want to thank-you for providing your pastor or deacon with some much-needed relief and time for rest and restoration. The ELCIC Summer Sermon Series is a wonderful opportunity for us to support our rostered leaders and to experience the amazing breadth of our wonderful church, from coast to coast to coast and I'm delighted to be a part of this effort!

In Paul's epistles, one of the themes that is worked over and over again is that of incorporation into the Body of Christ. People who are isolated, separate, and alone are called into the life of a new community. The dead are called out from the isolation of whatever cave it is that has imprisoned them and called to stand and live within a re-ordered community whose disciples are called to live as a "salt and light" family of faith whose relationships have been made right and made new by God's grace.

Paul describes that reality in his letter to the Galatians by saying that for those who are clothed in Christ there is no longer Jew nor

Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. It's a beautiful picture! But in life, we know that those distinctions do exist! We know that in the church of Galatia they most certainly existed. Why else would Paul have written this, if there were not struggles related to the status of Jew, Greek, slave, free, male and female?

Those distinctions also exist within our church. Not literally Jew and Greek. But most certainly the "in" and the "not so in." Perhaps not slave and free. But certainly, those with power and those without power. And who would deny that there are distinctions between male and female, gay and straight, rich or poor, indigenous and non-indigenous; black, brown and white! Those distinctions most certainly exist and testify to the measure to which we fall short of the standard of what Paul says it means to be clothed with Christ. Our seating plans are not aligned to those of the kingdom as described in today's Gospel lesson.

I am glad that our church is starting to come to terms with that reality. At this summer's ELCIC National Convention we received the reports and recommendations from three task forces whose creation was mandated by the 2019 ELCIC convention to address 1. Ableism; 2. Racism, White Supremacy, and issues of Racial Injustice; and 3. Homophobia, Biphobia, and Trans-phobia. Those reports and recommendations are available on the ELCIC website, and I commend them to you. Clearly, we have a lot of work to do, and it's work that I welcome!

I hope that you do too!

And now, a story. One night, thirty-six years ago, I was sitting in a chair, at home. It was a comfortable chair, made especially comfortable because it was a Saturday night - my sermon was done for the next day and the World Series was on television. All was well with the world!! It was a great game; the sixth game of the 1986 World Series, Mets and Red Sox, and we were moving

into the eighth inning with the score close and runners on base. It was around eleven o'clock, and then the phone rang.

I always jump when the phone rings after eleven o'clock. I'm always afraid that something terrible has happened. Someone's died, some crisis has occurred. And so, I was nervous as I rose from my comfortable chair that Saturday night to answer the phone. I said "Hello." And a very weak voice, muffled, asked simply and with no preliminaries. "Could you come and see us? We'd like to talk to a pastor."

To be truthful, my internal voice was saying things like, "Don't you know that it's 11:30 on a Saturday night and that my sermon is all done and that the World Series is on and that it's a close game in the eighth inning and that I'm sitting in my comfortable chair and that all is well with the world!?" But you'll be gratified to know that, instead, my professional, external voice asked, "Do you need to see me tonight; are you sick, do you need help?" "No, we just want to talk to a pastor." And so, reluctantly, I said I'd come. And I got up from my comfortable chair and shut off that World Series game that was so close in the eighth inning, put on my coat and left. And that's how I ended up meeting my two friends Alvin and Milton, two bachelor brothers who became a very important part of my life over the next few years.

They were quite a pair! Long hair and Rip Van Winkle beards. Milton had a huge, raven's wing moustache that completely covered his mouth. That's why it had been so difficult to understand him on the phone! He was talking through a bird's nest! They lived in the bottom half of an old house a few miles out of town. The only light in the room that night was the flickering of a small black and white TV in the corner; no sound, it didn't work. And there were boxes everywhere, of every size and description. Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes stacked all along one wall and at

least a dozen of those red toolboxes you get at the hardware store scattered around the room.

We talked for a long time that night. They told me portions of their stories, about a long distant time growing up on a farm, of eventually being banished from that farm and being left penniless by a spiteful brother. They talked about all sorts of things. But what I remember most about that night, with shame and embarrassment, was how when I came in to the house and Milton motioned for me to sit in the big, overstuffed chair in the corner of the room, I declined. "It's okay," I said. And then I quickly pulled up on one of those red Canadian Tire toolboxes and sat on it instead.

You see, the chair they directed me to was not my comfortable chair. This house was dirty. Alvin and Milton were dirty. It was obvious that they hadn't changed their clothes in days. It was also obvious that they slept with those same clothes on and in those chairs! And so, when I looked for a place to sit, one of the steel tool boxes seemed to be the safest option available. Bright and red, hard surfaced, made in a factory and sold in a store. It was the closest thing to my comfortable chair that there was in that room. I needed to insulate myself. And to my shame, I could not, on that first visit, accept their invitation to sit with them.

But many visits followed. Often, I'd stop in the mornings on my way to visit in the area hospitals. They lived right on the highway and usually, they would be out in the driveway, sitting in the now disabled '64 Chev that they had actually lived in the previous winter. They would sit there for hours on end! I'd stop and we'd talk. Milton always sat in the driver's side and would usually have a coffee in one hand and a beer in the other! And on a particularly festive day he'd have a little two-ounce bottle of rye tucked between his legs. And as we'd talk, he'd take little sips back and forth. I never saw him impaired in any way. The beer and coffee

would last him most of the day, just wetting his lips, back and forth, back and forth.

Sometimes we'd visit in the house. They'd talk old times and show me the little treasures locked up in those toolboxes - pill bottles, old photos and faded restaurant placemats. One year on Alvin's birthday my friend Fred Ludolph and I - another pastor who had befriended the two brothers - surprised them with a meal (Kentucky Fried Chicken, of course!) and we had a party together. The place was still dirty. But somehow as our relationships developed, the uncomfortable chair had somehow become comfortable. Visits became more frequent. I looked forward to them and in time I learned to sit in the chair that I had once so brazenly and dismissively avoided.

Eventually the story comes full circle. One beautiful spring day, about a year after Milton had died, Fred and I took Alvin and my daughters out fishing in celebration of his 78th birthday. It was the activity he had chosen when we asked what he would like to do to celebrate his birthday. He said he hadn't fished in 50 years! We had a wonderful time! We caught lots of fish! And then we went to my house and cooked them up! We had a birthday cake, a glass of beer, balloons and homemade cards from the children!

And all of a sudden, it struck me! Alvin was at my house, and was sitting in MY chair, the same comfortable, safe, secure and easy chair that I had been so reluctantly pulled out of on a long-ago Saturday evening in October during the sixth game of the World Series!

In the Gospel accounts of his life and ministry, Jesus describes the reign of God in the broadest and most inclusive of terms. He calls us to leave our comfortable chairs and to sit in the chair that makes us uncomfortable; to invite those we see as different to sit in the places that have previously been denied to them.

I would encourage you to be open to both issuing and receiving those invitations; to risk the uncomfortable chair; to risk considering how we might move beyond the safety of our too comfortable definitions of who should sit where and when, our often-unexamined definitions of who is in and who is out. Change the seating plan! Welcome and accept Jesus' invitation to follow his call to whomever and wherever that call might take you. In doing so, you may well find unforeseen and rich blessings, and as Jesus promises, a new and abundant life. AMEN