

Living a Life in Paradise

Paradise. I am not much of a world traveller. I have a desire to visit Europe and tour the great castles. Perhaps someday I will pursue walking the Camino Trail. My paradise is sitting at the lake or in a canoe. Then again, my paradise is also stepping onto a fresh sheet of ice, crisp air on your cheeks gliding along like nowhere else. It is kind of like walking on water (I know it's a groaner).

What is your paradise? I know for Pastor Sue her paradise is a hot all-inclusive week down south. No worries. Lots of sun and a bit of refreshments. My brother's paradise exists wherever he can put a fishing line in the water. For all those people not here but in the bush hunting, we know where their paradise is.

Context is everything. When you think about it, "paradise" is whatever we define or want it to be. Laying on a massage table having the knots in my back worked out. That is paradise for me. A hot bath after a long day gives great relief. A big bowl of popcorn and a few hours of senseless television watching can be as rejuvenating as a good book. Gathering your garden tools and planting or working up the soil can be rewarding. A phone call from a friend can be uplifting too. Whether we believe it or not, all these things can be paradise if we choose to let them be.

Paradise means different things to different people. I can tell you what paradise is not. Paradise is not a world at war. It is not the town of Pembroke when they run out of food at Community Foodbank like last Monday. Paradise is not having to sleep outside in winter

weather. Paradise is not global leaders who lead with greed in mind instead of gratitude.

Paradise is not Jesus being put to death on a cross.

Yet, even when Jesus was crucified and hanging on the cross he prayed for the people. “Father forgive them for they know not what they do,” even when the soldiers gambled to obtain his clothing and gave him sour wine. Their treatment of Jesus kept getting worse with a crown of thorns being placed upon his head. The crown of thorns must have seared as blood dripped down his face.

When I think of thorns, I am keenly aware how prickly they are. They’re sharp enough that they simply grab hold of your skin in a way that is enough to shock you. Metaphorically speaking I see that all of us have thorns still within us. We all feel different things in our lives. Some of us live in despair, feeling lonely or in a state of sadness. We do not feel the need to assist others but rather focus on ourselves. We are self-directed and try to achieve everything on our own without the help of God. At times we lack the faithfulness that God journeys with us as we live each day in the paradise of here and now.

When asked by one of the criminals hanging beside him, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise.” This can be interpreted in two ways: First to the disciple - you will die with me today and we will be with God in heaven. We will be free from all sorrow and with Jesus and all the saints that have gone before us. Or it can be interpreted that we are living in the paradise of our world in the here and now. We are free because of what Jesus chooses to do for us – die on the cross.

The human condition is to focus on pains, sorrows, and bad things. We are conditioned to feel unworthy if we don't reach the level of wealth of the Jones' and keep up the status living like others. We have been taught to be people who consume and buy into the capitalistic world unnecessarily.

God is calling us to slow down, to breath, to take in the Spirit and to enjoy a little bit of paradise on earth. Take the thorns out. Stop thinking we can wear crowns of privilege and be fulfilled. Instead, live lives of faith!

“Have you ever talked with someone who has recently been saved or has recently found God?” There was a time when I worked in a retirement home in Cambridge as the resident chaplain. A woman had recently come to know God at 84 years old. It was her conviction that she was to convert all the residents to Christianity and me, the chaplain, also. I hated to break her heart by saying that I was a chosen child of God saved at baptism. She responded by asking, “yes but have you been re-baptized?” It was no use. She did not understand me. What she did understand was that she was living in paradise in the here and now. She had no reason to sit back in her comfy chair and simply give thanks for the freedom of her faith. She got busy celebrating the paradise of love in her heart.

As Lutherans I know the whole concept of talking about our faith with others scares the living bejeebers out of you. You don't talk about your faith with others. That's a church thing. We don't knock on doors. That is what those “evangelicals” and jehovahs do. Wrong!

We are living in paradise. The paradise of God's love lives in us. God's love is meant to be shared. It isn't just about knocking on doors. It is about talking to people in a kind way as

you are waiting in line at the grocery store. It is about making that extra donation to Gifts from the Heart and CLWR at Christmas time. Living in paradise is giving your warm gloves to a person sitting downtown on the sidewalk hoping for a few quarters. Living in paradise is caring for a stranger as they walk slowly across the road. Living in paradise is using your talents to volunteer at the church or somewhere else. Living in paradise is stepping outside your comfort zone to care for someone unlike yourself. Living in paradise is about living the calling at our baptism to be servants. Paradise is calling us to be Christ-like. Live your faith today and be the people we are free to be. For we are living in paradise today waiting to join Jesus one day in God's heavenly paradise. Amen.