

The Second Sunday of Easter
 April 11, 2021
 First Lutheran Church
 St. Joseph, MO
 Pastor Keith Hohly

Grace and Peace to you this day in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In his book *Leaving Home*, Garrison Keillor writes often of Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church. For example, there's the time when twelve men of the congregation decided to go to Hawaii for the National Church Ushers Convention and participate in the finals of the Ushers Team Competition. These guys raised thousands of dollars for their trip and drilled for two nights a week for six months, practicing their silent usher signals. One of these which I found particularly fascinating is when the usher places his hands on his hips with elbows turned outward, and then flutters his fingers. This means: "need a new collection plate, this one is too full." As Keillor notes, this is "a signal seldom used in church, but popular at contests."

The ushering team from Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church called themselves the Herdsmen. Unfortunately, about a month before the competition in Hawaii, dissension arose on the team. There were thirteen members of the Herdsmen, but only twelve would be allowed to make the trip to Hawaii. Head Usher Val Tollefson dutifully made the selections, but the rest of men weren't happy with his decision. It caused them to lose their focus. It caused them to lose their confidence. Sadly, at the semifinal competition in Minneapolis, the Herdsmen didn't qualify high enough to be eligible to compete in Hawaii.

Back at Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church, some suggested they go anyway. After all, they had already raised the money to pay their own way, so why not just go? The Herdsmen, though, wouldn't hear of it. You don't just fly over to Hawaii for your own pleasure because you wanted to. That's too extravagant. You've got to have a good reason to go to paradise. Someone there must need you. There has to be no way out of not going. God knows you don't want to go, but you have to. It's that kind of a deal.

Keillor explains it this way:

My people aren't paradise people. We've lived in Minnesota all our lives and it took a lot out of us. My people aren't sure if we'll even like paradise: not sure if perfection is all it's cracked up to be. My people will arrive in heaven and stand just inside the gate, shuffling around. "It's a lot bigger than I thought it was going to be," we'll think. We'll say, "No, thank you, we can't stay for eternity, we'll just sit and have a few minutes of bliss with you and then we have to get back."

We were brought up to work hard, not complain, accept that life is hard, and make the best of what little we have ... When Lake Wobegon Lutheran Women walk into heaven, they'll think it's church and look for the stairs to go down to the basement where the kitchen is. When the men arrive, they'll look at the Father's mansions and talk about siding: aluminum vs. cedar shakes.

My people aren't paradise people, but when God loves you, then everywhere is paradise enough ... Probably it will last because it has endured so much already.

You know, for the life of me I don't know how he did it, but somehow in first century Palestine, Jesus found at least eleven Scandinavian Lutherans to be his disciples. The gospel text we have heard this morning comes from Luke and it is about what happened on Easter evening. By Easter evening in Luke's gospel, Jesus had already been with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and he had appeared to Simon Peter. In the evening they were all gathered together in Jerusalem: the two Emmaus boys and Simon Peter, the rest of the disciples

and their companions, and they were all talking about the events of the day. That's when Jesus appeared in their midst and said, "Peace be with you."

Now, given that some of them had witnessed the empty tomb, and given that three of them had already seen Jesus themselves, you would think that everybody now would be falling over themselves with joy. But no, they were startled and terrified, Luke says, and they thought they were seeing a ghost. It's the old Lutheran axiom: "If it's too good to be true it probably isn't." Jesus was there offering them peace—not just peace of mind or a quieting of their anxiety—he was offering them shalom—what someone once defined as "the encounter between the human heart and the selfless love of God." Jesus was there offering them Hawaii—and they wouldn't have it. Even when he had showed the wounds in his hands and feet, even when he invited them to touch him and see he was flesh, even while they were starting to come around, even in their joy, Luke tells us, they were disbelieving and still wondering.

So, knowing these were Scandinavian Lutherans he had before him, Jesus did a very smart thing: he gave them a job to do. When all else fails ... go to work. Maybe there were some German Lutherans in the bunch, too. Jesus gave them something to do. "You are my witnesses," he told them, "You are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in my name to all."

We were brought up to work hard, to not complain, accept that life is hard, and do the best with what little we have. Give us something to do, and then maybe the other things will come together, too. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. For God so loved the world that he raised Jesus from the dead. It is difficult to believe in the resurrection. It is difficult to understand how one can be raised in the flesh.

One might think that the process is supposed to go like this: First you believe in the resurrection and find in the resurrection the proof of God's love for us, and then, because we know God loves us, we turn and love each other and the whole world. But sometimes it is easier for us to do things backwards. Sometimes it helps to turn the process around. Sometimes it works best to start with loving each other and the world, and our loving becomes a witness to God's love for us, and when we begin to understand how much God loves us, then maybe believing in the resurrection is not as difficult as it once was.

I believe Garrison Keillor is on to something in saying: "when God loves you, then everywhere is paradise enough." I would also say that when we love as God loves, then everywhere is paradise enough. Sometimes it is in the doing, it is in loving, we find what seems too good to be true really is true. Love will last, love will endure, because love has endured so much already.

It's not that we're saved by our work and not by grace. It's just that sometimes our loving helps us see the grace, and sometimes our loving helps us believe in God's love for us. That's not the way it always is, and that's not the way it is for everyone. But that's the way it is for some of us, yet we also need to know, sometimes it's also okay to go to Hawaii just to go to Hawaii.