

To begin, I have to say what an honor it is to be with you today. My family and I moved to Wisconsin 9 years ago, and for most of that time, I was the pastor of St. Luke Lutheran in Slinger. Then, back in May, I began as the “Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission” in our Synod Office. And I have to say, I am a parish pastor at heart. I miss the folks in Slinger. There are some beautiful things happening in that congregation. But there are some beautiful things happening in *this* congregation! And that is the greatest joy of this new role is that every Sunday, I get to be in a different congregation, but it’s the same church. We’re like those megachurches that advertise “one church, 5 campuses!” Well, we have that beat! The Greater Milwaukee Synod is one church, 122 campuses! Each Sunday, gathering like this to celebrate a grace we didn’t earn and can’t help but share. So I want to begin with a word of thanks. Thank you for being a place people can come to hear something so different than the divisive messages of the culture. Thank you for being a place people can come together across difference to make a difference. Thank you...for being an oasis in the Waukesha community and beyond.

Now, let’s talk about these scriptures before us this morning because truly, this Word of God is the thing that gathers us here every week. And today’s scriptures have the power to *challenge* us and *change* us, if we are still long enough to hear them. The Gospel lesson you just heard is yet another instance of the religious professionals being so full of *themselves* that there is no room for anything else; and if we really listen to this exchange between them and Jesus, it can cause us to ask what fills our lives too. So, that’s what we are going to be talking about today...the ways we are *full*, the ways we are “full of it” (as my mother used to say), and the ways Christ can empty us out for something bigger. Will you pray with me as we begin? God, so many things fill our hearts, our minds, and our schedules. We take the things that feel too heavy to carry and we lay them down at the foot of your cross this morning, trusting that you are big enough to carry them with us for a while. Quiet us, help us to be still; so we can hear you speaking in the words we need to hear. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Have you ever lost yourself in a song? You know, sitting at a stoplight belting out the high notes, or drumming on the steering wheel? Maybe for you, it isn't in the car...maybe it is when you are home alone, cranking up the stereo to rock out to Pink Floyd. Or maybe for you, it is when we gather here on Easter morning and begin with "Jesus Christ is risen today..." Wherever it is, I bet you know what it's like to get caught up in a song you love...to kind of forget about how you might look to others. Maybe you dance, or you move a little. For me, it's "Carry on my wayward son..." (Kansas). You know the only time this *doesn't* happen for me? When I am so preoccupied with other concerns that I don't notice the music playing. When I have myself worrying about the next task at work, or the next task at home, the best song could come on the radio, and I would miss it because I am just so full of other worries. Well, I don't know if you noticed it or not, but there's a song happening in the Gospel lesson today, but the chief priests and the elders are missing it. And this is not a song composed of notes on paper...it's God's grand song of salvation; began at the dawn of creation, with new verses written in the life and ministry of Christ. So, let's give ourselves a little context here and look at the couple of verses of this beautiful song that happened before today's reading. A couple of chapters before what we read today, Jesus spoke the beautiful parable of the lost sheep...where we hear that God cares *so much* for the outsider, that God will even act like a foolish shepherd, leaving the 99 to find the one. Just a little bit after that, Jesus healed two blind men and blessed the children. And then, *right before* today's reading, Jesus entered the city on a donkey's back while we lined the streets with palm branches in our hands singing, "All Glory, Laud and Honor...to you, Redeemer King!" Then, we see him hop off that donkey when he sees the moneychangers taking advantage of people in the temple. He flips over their tables and then...then comes today's reading. Now it makes more sense why the religious professionals look at him and say, "by what authority do you do these things?"

See, these guys were the experts of their day. They knew the scriptures inside and out; they knew how God was "supposed" to act, and this Jesus wasn't it. Touching the lepers and healing even women and children, the second class citizens...he broke all the rules, colored

outside all the lines, and these chief priests and elders were so full of *themselves* and *their ideas about God* that they were missing the chance to get swept up in a song that was so much bigger than them, or the institution they represented.

Now, we have to stop right here for a moment; because it is really easy to get down on the chief priests and the elders, and in other stories even the Pharisees...as these horrible people who missed the point of what Jesus was all about in favor of defending the institutions they helped build. But wait just a moment; how often do we do the same thing? How often do we find ourselves frustrated by things like church budgets, or worship style, or which hymn is chosen? How often in Christian history have we decided that “those” Christians over there aren’t doing it right, so we have to form this group over here so we *can be* right? How often...have we be so *full* of worries or concerns about the institution of the church that we have missed Christ’s invitation to lose ourselves in the song? There is a passage from the Bible that was assigned for today, but we haven’t read it yet; and I *have to* read it for you...it is from Philippians chapter 2...and Bible scholars believe it is a piece of an ancient hymn. We don’t know the *music* this was sung to, but just listen to the beautiful language describing what Jesus was all about:

⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (Philippians 2:4-7)

There is one key phrase in that song; Christ emptied himself. He didn’t grab for power, or set up a church hierarchy. We did that. He poured himself out for the sake of the world...and *that* is the song we are called to lose ourselves in. We don’t have to be full of all the right answers, or build churches full of great programming. We simply have to stand ready to be emptied out in service to others; to lose ourselves in the song. I will never forget the first time I really felt this...emptied out. It was the first few days of my internship in Ft. Worth, Texas. I had mounds of boxes in my office; books and papers that represented all of my

religious education to that point. I remember looking at that pile of knowledge and thinking, “bring it on internship! I’m ready for this!” I could translate from the original Greek. I could chant the liturgy. I was ready.

But then, one week in, my supervisor, the pastor of that church, was out of town; and a long-time member of that congregation fell and broke her hip. The doctors told us...she wouldn’t survive the surgery. The pastor is out of town...send in the intern! So, whether I felt ready for it or not, I had to go. Sitting in that hospital room, praying with this woman as she was coming to the end of her life, I had no more right answers. I was *empty*. But she didn’t need right answers. She needed someone to be with her, to hold her hand and tell her of the resurrection. We shared communion together...and that day, both she and I lost ourselves in the song. As we shared bread and wine, body and blood...we became a part of that great Christ hymn.

In just a few moments, you and I will gather around bread and wine. We’ll come empty-handed to remember that we don’t have to have the right answers. We simply have to be ready to be poured out for the sake of the world. I am aware that there is something heavy that you all are carrying as a community right now; the loss of a young man. Let me just say; there are no right answers for that. But there is love. There is *always* love. And this community will *feel* that love when even this very church building is emptied out. In about 30 minutes or so, as we speak the words “go in peace, serve the Lord!” This room will be poured out and Christ’s grace and mercy will again flood the world...through *you*.

Because the beautiful truth of the church is that in here, Christ uses this body and blood (*referencing the bread and wine on the table*), but out there in the world, Christ uses *this* body and blood (*referencing our bodies*). Yours and mine. To sing the song the world needs to hear. So...get ready. I don’t know what your note to play is. Maybe you are the drumbeat, or maybe you are the high notes. But you have a part in this song. You know someone outside these walls who needs a word of hope, or strength, or comfort. Someone who isn’t going to walk through those doors and meet Pastor Chris or Pastor Angela. So guess who their pastor is?

Ascension Lutheran Church

Rev. Matt Short, Assistant to the Bishop

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You. And I take great comfort in the fact that I am looking at 150 ministers ready to be poured out into the world.

That...is a song I can sing along to. Thanks be to God! Amen.