



I've Been on Sabbatical, Ask Pastor Tony

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
18 September 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

To quote Randy Quaid in *Independence Day*; Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*; Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator*; and Peter Parker in *Spiderman 2*: “I’m back!” I think it sounds better in Spanish: *Estoy de Vuelta*. Are you ready? *Estas listo?* I have missed you! *Los extrañe!*

It has been a long 3 months/12 weeks/90 days/2160 hours/129,600 minutes. Did I enjoy it? Of course. Some moments more than others. There are staff members sitting around the church wearing fresh leis from Hawaii. Susan Otto, our Council President has one too. All of them have carried extra workload while I have been away on sabbatical – please thank them for their going above and beyond the call. Please also thank my wife and kids - who put up with me at home nonstop, almost, for the last 12 weeks. On top of having to suffer through summer vacation, our children were made to help dad clean closets, clean out and re-organize the kitchen, and clean the garage, do yardwork, and keep their own rooms clean all summer long.

Pastor Tony will tell you that I have been itching, hungering, yearning, dying to get back to the work and ministry alongside you at Ascension. Perhaps. I did sneak in for an hour or two one day a week for the last three couple of weeks until last week – but for the most part I did my best to stay away. So much so – that I did not even watch worship online until the beginning of August. But I will confess, it was hard to be away. The rest was wonderful and needed, but I missed you; I missed preaching and leading worship; I missed knowing about what was happening in this community and how well you were getting along without me. And of course, I had no doubts that this place – all of you – would continue beautifully in my absence. However, I did miss Edwin and Pastor Tony more than I thought I would. And so I had these made to hang up at home.

And that is where I want to begin today. Walking fully back into the office on Tuesday, I was met with hugs and smiles and questions. So many questions. And my first response was, “I’ve been on sabbatical – ask pastor Tony.” And that felt so good to say that I am using that line for at least the rest of the month of September. So, I need you to help me out. When I say, “I’ve been on sabbatical.” You say, “ask Pastor Tony.” Pastor Chris, what time is church on Sunday? I’ve been on sabbatical. ASK PASTOR TONY. Pastor Chris, when will the bathrooms be finished. I’ve been on sabbatical. ASK PASTOR TONY. Pastor Chris, when will the kitchen be finished? I’ve been on sabbatical. ASK PASTOR TONY. Pastor Chris, who threw away my lunch? I’ve been on sabbatical. ASK PASTOR TONY. I mean, it was me. But I have not been back long enough to own that. Pastor Chris, how was sabbatical? Okay this one I will take.

In a nutshell, sabbatical was wonderful. Restful, relaxing, restorative. I spent a lot of time with family: those I live with and those who live far away. We spent time in Hawaii swimming, snorkeling, hiking, eating, laughing, and eating. I landscaped at home until almost every project was completed. I spent time with a college friend in Chicago who had only never met our



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daughters and the last time I saw him Andrew was 2. I went to Canada with my dad and my sister to remember my mom. We visited Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City, and Halifax, Nova Scotia. I remembered and practiced just enough French to order food a couple of times in Quebec City without embarrassing myself. And in Nova Scotia – the Atlantic Ocean was close enough to put my hand in but too cold to step into. I entered a silent retreat from Friday until Sunday. By far, this event received the most attention – people either thought it was the best idea ever or the worst. There will be more to come on all these things, but our last night in Nova Scotia is the story to share. For our last night, we decided on a fancy steak house where they served full lobsters for dinner. We ate on the porch in beautiful weather under a canopy of hanging lights. I ordered my first lobster dinner. And when I finished eating, my hands were a mess. I excused myself to find the bathroom to wash my hands. I walked into the restaurant, through the restaurant, and found myself face-to-face with the one-inch-thick glass door. And as I hit the glass door with my whole face – this is the sound that I made. GONG. I kid you not, the entire restaurant went quiet. The bartenders quit bartending. The oyster shuckers quit shucking. The people talking quit talking. And I felt my whole head and body bounce back from the glass door. I did not know what had happened until the hostess shook my shoulder. “Are you all right?” she said. I started laughing and then felt the pain in my head and nose. I must have looked confused, because she said, “I have asked you three times, are you okay?” I did not know exactly what had happened until I looked at the glass door and saw my entire face print reflecting back at me from the glass. Needless to say, I made my way to the bathroom to wash my hands and feel the goose egg already forming on my forehead and headed back outside. Our waitress was standing at our table. My sister asked I got lost. And I told them I hit the glass door full force with my face the waitress started laughing and said the hostess just told her someone smoked their face on the glass entry door. “That was you?” Yes. Yes it was.

It took a few days for the swelling to go down but not before I was able to reflect on the traumatic faceplant and learn from the experience. We have been many things here at Ascension. In the past 72 years we have traveled roads and glorified God in ways those first, brave charter members in 1949 would have never imagined. All that being said, we are not now, who we have once been. We are always giving thanks for those who came before us. The ministry we do today builds on the faithful foundations of those who came before us. And as I have said before and will say again...our history informs who we are and who we will be – it does not dictate who we must be. Which brings me to this confession? Before I went on sabbatical, I sat through one of the most challenging meetings of my ministry. For more than two hours, we debated back and forth as to what direction we should go with regard to how our wing leaders live out their ministry among us. I was frustrated – they were frustrated and finally I just could not do anymore. I begged Pastor Tony to help and even Pastor Tony and his calm leadership and wisdom was met with resistance. I am not sure any of us were wrong. All of us are passionate about sharing the story of Jesus and our love for this community. What I realized is that we are trying to put new wine into old wineskins. Even though I am the one who likes to



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shake things up – I kept trying to put everyone into the positions that were in place before I arrived. I confess, I am not sure the old structures work for who we are today. Forgive me. Cheryl, Steve, Carol, Karen, Shirley. Forgive me for my stubbornness and my desire to confine your passion to old ways of being church. Let's do something new. Let's be something new. So much of the time, I believe we are trying to play catch-up with where the Holy Spirit is leading.

¹⁴ As Jesus was walking along, he saw Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁵ And as Jesus sat at dinner in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples. ¹⁶ When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Of which your pastor counts himself among them. Pastor and Author Tim Keller, writes that the church should be a "hospital for sinners, not a museum for the saints." We are all in need of the great physician - the One who heals – the One who saves. It is possible that my memory of my own need to be forgiven and loved became clouded in the months leading up to my sabbatical. So, my friends...let's do something new. Let's be something new.

Who among us does not know someone hungry to be made well? Someone hurting for forgiveness? Someone wanting to be known? We are already into ministry that is meaningful and inspiring in these early weeks of fall programming. Our GriefShare ministry is tending some of the deep loss and pain suffered in the past months as well as the past couple of years of covid delay. Pastor Tony, Edwin and I are tending individuals in our community suffering through some difficult moments of suffering in their health, their relationships, their faith. If one of you have everything figure out – please let me know after worship. But for the rest of us – this community of faith continues to be a place to worship joyfully, share honestly, grieve with support, and pray for God's power to be revealed and God's resurrection power to be remembered to us again and again.

I am hopeful for the days ahead. Sabbatical has a way of offering clarity to the restlessness. I am hopeful and excited and praying for the possible calling of a pastor for a part-time call to join our community in ministry and mission to serve our youth and walk alongside us in faith formation. The Call Committee has scheduled the interview. I would covet your prayers for their discernment and the discernment of this pastoral candidate. I share all of that as we are also beginning our final year of seminary with Edwin. His internship will come to a close on October 30. We are already in conversation with the Bishop and have received his blessing to enter into the call process in the Spring to consider Edwin for a part-time call to join us in ministry as an ordained pastor. Let's do something new. Let's be something new.



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This is not simply who I want us to be or who I think we should be. This is who we already are. A community that is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus. A community that welcomes and inspires others to join us on this journey of faith. The Holy Spirit is leading – we are going to do our best to catch-up.

What are the words we know so well.

Creo en un solo Dios, Padre todopoderoso, Creador del cielo y de la tierra, de todo lo visible y lo invisible. We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

This is what we believe. This is who we are. This is what God invites us to share with the world outside our doors.

There is one Easter Egg still waiting to be found in the sanctuary today from this past Easter. One quiet moment of resurrection joy waiting to be revealed. People of God, inside each of us is that same quiet moment of resurrection joy waiting to be shared with someone you already know. You need not knock on some stranger's door – though you have my permission to do so. Someone you already know is hoping and praying for a word of peace, of joy, of new life. You can be that word for them. This can be a place for them to hear that word.

Pastor Chris, what's next for us here at Ascension? Well, my friends, I've been on sabbatical. Ask Pastor Tony. Or ask me again in a few weeks. Or better yet – let's ask God that question together. Let's do something new. Let's be something new. To the great glory of God. Amen.