



Pastor Chris Marien
Matthew 10:24-39

Ascension Lutheran Church
June 28, 2020

Reflection: God's Welcome

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen. It seems I am always getting myself into trouble by preaching on the Sundays that follow some difficult and life-changing event in my life. Today is no different. Tony, our Director of Faith Formation, was gracious enough to pick-up the task of preaching and leading worship last Sunday and Vicki and Ben, flexible in their worship planning, and Scot Greger, kind enough to jump in to sing at the last minute. All so that I could tend my family as we walked alongside my mom; as we navigated prayers, ICU visits, test results, doctor's advice, and our own gut-wrenching moments of understanding and revelation; as we made the decision to release my mom from this life for the life to come. Though, I am not sure we had much decision to make. We like to think we have such power. Yet, I am convinced that God is the One whose fingers trace the heart rhythms on monitors and grant each breath no matter how much oxygen the ventilator is offering at the side of the bed.

I confess I find myself in a wilderness unknown to me. A wilderness for which I received no welcome. It amuses me that the reading for this Sunday speaks of the welcome we ourselves offer to others and, in so welcoming others, we welcome God's very self into our midst. A friend sent me a message last night to tell me that he is "carrying the hope of the resurrection on my behalf if or when my faith finds itself in a desert land for a time." Those words brought me peace last night – though I admit it was short-lived as I woke up at 1:30 a.m. and did not go back to sleep until 4 a.m. Again, a wilderness unfamiliar to me.

In almost 20 years of ministry, I have walked into the wilderness moments of countless lives of members of churches I have served as pastor and as friend – privileged enough to be invited into one of the most tender and sacred moments in the life of a family as well as one of the most raw and vulnerable moments in the life of a family. My call as pastor, as I understand it, has been, and continues to be, to provide those I am called to serve and to love with words of hope and God's promise. To remind you that by the death and resurrection of Jesus, each of us is promised a welcome into eternal life in the presence of God. At the bedside of those you have loved, I have wiped away tears; offered shoulders to cry on; prayed prayers; sang songs; offered blessings; and shared words of peace with a kiss on the forehead of people I have known and loved and people I have never met who meant the world to you. I have listened to you tell the stories of the ones you love who have gone before you into the Kingdom of God. I am grateful for all of your stories. There are moments where you have smiled as you spoke – moments where you wept – moments where the tears simply welled up at the edge of your eyes. I am grateful that you chose to take the time to share a memory of someone you have loved and lost. In this wilderness I currently find myself in – your stories have been my teachers and provided me with the direction and road map for my own grief. And yet – I still wander in this wilderness – still trying to find my footing on an unsure path. How do I tend the grief of my dad after 51 years of marriage? How do I care for my sister – who knows intimately the grief I carry within myself? How do parents tend the grief of children who now live with the absence of their grandmother? And through all of these questions – as I reflect – I also find myself angry for the simple fact – that the loss of my mother at 72 is quiet simply unfair.

And this welcome I did not receive as I entered this unfamiliar wilderness, would I have wanted a welcome anyways? I am guessing I would not. In these past days of preparation for my mother's funeral – I find this unfamiliar wilderness more difficult for the inability to gather with all of you. Yes – many of you have shared messages of love and prayer and support. And my family is grateful – so very grateful for your care from afar. Yet, I have spent my life – in the weekly presence of my faith community. Your hugs, your touch, your smiles, the knowing glances across the sanctuary when you catch my eye – all of those moments provide welcome in the fear and foreboding wilderness. And if anything causes this wilderness moment to overwhelm – it is the absence of your voices raised in song. One of the great gifts of the gathered community is the mutual support offered in the communal singing. To hear you sing, "I love to tell the story of unseen things above." To be surrounded by your voices singing, "Do not be afraid I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine." To gather at God's table and hear the words, "Let us break bread together on our knees. Let us break bread together on our knees. When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun, O Lord have mercy on me." And finally, to hear you praise God with the words, "Amazing grace how

sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." Those are the words of the songs I remember you singing. Those are the words I long to hear you sing together again.

And that, my friends, is the welcome I hold onto this day in the midst of the wilderness. It is the welcome I hope you can hear wherever you are. A welcome that comes not from us alone, but from the very heart of God – by God's deep love and overwhelming grace. God's welcome was for my mom this past week as God wrapped arms of love around her at the gates of heaven. God's welcome was for my family as we entered into a wilderness we did not choose. God's welcome is for each of you as you are reminded that you are not alone and that you are loved. Thanks be to God. Amen.