

In my office, I have a sign that says, “All are called to serve the Lord.” It was a going away gift from my first call in LaMoure, North Dakota and the story behind it is that over the course of 4 and a half years, the congregation began to pick up on some of favorite preaching themes. It’s something that they did for each of their previous pastors. Some preached a lot on love, some on discipleship, and all other kinds of themes. And for me, the theme they decided on was that of being called – the idea that each of us, through our baptisms, has a purpose and mission given to us by God that we are to take up as we participate in God’s Kingdom here and now.

What a blessing it is to be invited to share in the work of God to renew, restore, and redeem a broken world. And also, what an incredible challenge it is to follow where we are called, for it might mean (and often does) that we will enter into a time and space that is unknown to us, that requires us to leave behind the comforts of the familiar in the pursuit of a promise that we cannot fully picture or comprehend yet. It means leaning more fully into hope and we’ve been taught by the world we live in that hope is an unsteady ledge to hold onto.

I think that’s at the heart of what Jesus is trying to say in this passage. There are people that want to follow him and are willing to follow him, as long as it’s on their own terms. They want to take the leap of faith, leaning into hope, but first they want to make sure all their ducks are in a row. “I will follow you, Jesus” is a great sentiment of faith. But Jesus knows that “I will” often never comes. And that’s the thing about being called. We are called where we are presently to step in faith toward a future God knows, a future that is not what the past was or what the present is.

Which is why Jesus offers this true and yet difficult word: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Because as much as we might find comfort in what was, simply because it’s familiar, what Jesus is trying to help us see is that dreaming of a world that was doesn’t work. Longing for what was isn’t a fit for the Kingdom because the fullness of God’s Kingdom isn’t back there. The Kingdom is what lies ahead. So when Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead,” I think a big part of what we need to hear is that the past is passed. We can’t live there anymore. We’ve been where we’ve been. But where we’ve been is not where we are going.

Because the call of Jesus always comes to us where we are. But the call is an invitation to live with the future of God in mind. It calls us to take inventory of where we are, appreciating where we’ve been and how we came to be here at all. So yes, let us give thanks for what was. Let us rejoice in the ways that God has led us here to this place and time. And then we are called to leave it behind. We are called instead to cast our gaze to the promised future of God, so that we, guided by the Spirit, may live today as the future will be.

As many of you know, this year marks the 50th Anniversary of Joy Lutheran Church. And the truth is, we would not be here today if it were not for all of the things that took place in these prior 50 years. This is a year of celebration for so many reasons. I have learned so much about this place and the things that God has done here through people committed to living into the call of proclaiming the Gospel through word and deed. Who could have ever imagined that what began as a mission start funded by Vacation Bible School kids would become the congregation we are today? Who could have ever thought it possible that 4 different denominations would share the same worship space? And what’s more, that Lutherans and Catholics would worship together on Good Friday and Easter? Who could have ever thought that a church would host an Oktoberfest event that started at 6pm and ended who knows when? Maybe there are some things of the past that should come back...

But perhaps my favorite story that I’ve learned goes back to 1983. Now, you first have to understand that the ELCA was not formed until 1988. Since that time, the ELCA has formed open communion agreements with other denominations, which, as you might guess, allows us to share communion together with non-ELCA church bodies, such as the Episcopalian Church. That agreement with the Episcopalians did not happen until 1999. But Joy Lutheran Church, you rebels... On August 28th, 1983 – 16 years before it was acceptable to do so – Joy Lutheran Church and St. Matthew Episcopal Church shared the gracious gift of Christ’s body and blood together. We had open communion before it was cool!

But do you see what this means? Do you see how incredible this is? It means that following the call of Christ today, walking boldly in faith to a future that is not yet reality, is a part of our history. This is what it looks like to live as people who are attentive the work of God in the world. This is what it means to be guided by the Spirit, hearing the promise of the future we are being led into and then living to that Kingdom end today, where all are one in Christ. This is what it means to put the hand the plow and not look back. This is what it means to know and trust and believe in the power of being called to partner with God’s ultimate mission of redemption. This is living presently with a vision for God’s promised future.

My brothers and sisters of Christ, we have much to celebrate over the past 50 years. We have many memories to share and stories to tell of challenges overcome and incredible ministry in the Parker community. 50 years of history that look back upon and give thanks to God for. But as we celebrate what was, let us remember the call of Christ. For we are not being led to the past. We are being called forward, into the next 50 years. May our life together be guided by the vision of God’s promised future. For God is faithful, God is good, and Christ continues to call. By the grace of God, let us boldly answer this call, as we venture into the hoped for future of God. All thanks be to God! Amen.