

Sunday, September 26th 2021

After reading the Gospel lesson this morning, I can imagine my Swedish Grandma say, “Uff Da.” What is all this stuff about cutting off the hands and feet and tearing out the eyes?

Lots of dis-membering going on... And in two different ways, first we have the disciple John, trying to stop someone from healing in Jesus’ name, or dis-membering that person, “he’s not one of us!” Jesus said to him, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus opens the possibilities for inclusion so wide it simply boggles the mind.

Then we have Jesus talking about dis-membering our body to prevent ourselves from being a stumbling block to others, like the disciple John was being a stumbling block...

Quick story... and this is familiar... When I was young, I remember wondering about the universe... about God... and trying to imagine the immense vastness of this whole creation. Remember laying on your back when you were a kid and looking at the stars?

I had an innocent sense of vastness and love and belonging. And that’s probably because of my parents... They loved us so much... The whole universe seemed bathed in love and mystery. I felt safe and secure...

And then I started growing up... Along with all the other church kids, I went to bible camp, and for many years. And you would think bible camp would be a good experience! Unfortunately for me, it was where I experienced intense fear and doubt...

Every morning, afternoon and evening we heard about hell and how much God hated sinners... I was scared to death! I think they were trying to scare us into heaven! I tried to live a perfect life, believe me I tried... But it was impossible... I knew at my core I was a sinner...

I kept repeating their salvation prayer, hoping that would take my sin away... I must have prayed it a million times! And you know what? Nothing changed... Nothing happened! I was supposed to feel happy and saved. But I never felt anything, except more and more fear and doubt...

The more I wanted to be saved, the more it seemed God was ignoring me. In fact, it seemed to me that God was angry at me. And do you see how this is all shame-based? This constant drum beat of, "You're not good enough, you're not good enough..."

Eventually it seemed more life giving to just let it go. And that's what I did, I wanted nothing to do with Church... You see, for me, the bible camp experience was a stumbling block, it dis-membered me from God.

I spent years in this wounded space...

Much later in life, Kris wanted the kids to go to Sunday school. After trying a couple of other churches, I put my foot down and said, if it's so important for the kids to go to church, let's bring them to that church we drive past all the time.

It was convenient... I could drop the kids off, and pick up em up later. It was working great! Until the day Johanna said, "Dad, we're singing in church next week you have to come and hear us!" What do you do?

I remember the first time. I had no idea what was going on! I had attended a lot of church before, but I didn't recognize anything. Everyone was reading from a green book, flipping pages... Shirley and Alvie noticed our confusion, and took us under their wing...

We started attending little by little. Once we knew the routine, I could pay attention to what we were actually saying. And the confession and forgiveness always floored me. I had never heard those words before, people confessing to be sinners and in bondage to sin?

And I knew it to be the truth. It certainly was my truth... And not only confessing to be sinners, but receiving God's forgiveness... The whole confession and forgiveness thing, was so new and different, it spoke to me...

About that time, I started working at the Shepherd's Center and one of my friends and confidants was Eleanore Miller, she grew up at Cannon River, Eleanore Brage... Always so loving, kind and gracious... I loved Eleanore's stories: she was a member of Vasa, but every bit a Child of God that included Cannon River and Cross of Christ as well.

All of these things, and many more led to my being baptized, and nothing has been the same since... My identity changed... When I look back on that journey now, it seems unbelievable. Who'd a thunk!

It led to Seminary, being ordained, being called to St Olaf, and coming full circle, being called here to Cross of Christ and Cannon River.

That's all pretty much my story... But **this** is the important thing, **this** is what I want you to know and always remember, this is first and foremost **your** story. **You** brought me and my family in!

It was all about having a Sunday School that welcomed kids. It's about the Sunday School teachers... It's about encouraging kids to sing in worship!

It's about Shirley and Alvie showing us how to follow along... It's about the gospel being preached, as Luther would say, in its pure form...

It's about VBS and my kids learning to love this place... It's all about being neighbors! It's about fishing trips to Canada... It's about all those relationships with caring people like all of you!

I was baptized, here in this community, you made me a part of this Body of Christ. It was this community, and at both Cross of Christ and Cannon River that remembered me and my whole family!

The good news today is that Jesus works miracles... He finds ways for people to belong... "Whoever is not against us is for us." And I believe it because I've seen it...

And thank you... Thanks for answering God's call to care for me and my family... And thanks for the privilege to come back and to serve WITH you...

You taught me to love God, and love the neighbor, and that's exactly what we do, because we worship a God who makes miracles happen...

Amen...