

I'm quite fortunate in my life that I've had opportunities to travel. The little kid who remembers the day the road in front of our house got paved for the first time, has been able to traverse much of the United States and four of the seven continents. In my travels I've embraced languages, music, food, and culture. I learned that being able to say a few words in a language could ingratiate me to locals.

Being open to eating what is on the menu, so long as it wasn't something I was allergic to, made for some adventurous yet wonderful meals.

Being able to be among people in rural Mississippi or in the heart of some of the world's largest cities has enriched my life. It has given me some odd phrases that pop into my language. And sometimes people from one part of my world appear in another. My wife and kids just shake their heads when I run across a friend in an airport or when we are on vacation. In one particularly memorable moment I was dining in the cafeteria of the National Theatre in Beijing when my friend Andreas from Germany walked up to the table. People from one part of my world were in another part of my world and it was both exciting and confusing at first.

Today's reading from Corinthians can be easily drawn to the travels that I have been fortunate to do in my life. Paul speaks of being come like people to encourage them to know the Gospel. I understand some of what is being said. Taking a moment to behave according to local custom or tradition has opened doors to conversations that I will treasure for a lifetime. And Paul knows that those are the things that open the doors to all kinds of evangelism. But, being a good Lutheran, I started to think of this passage in ways that might not involve knocking on doors.

While everyone may not have the good fortune of domestic or world travel, we all travel. We travel through life and discover different aspects of ourselves. I've lived life as a student, husband, father, friend, and employee, just to name a few. Honestly, I say I've lived those lives because I've been a different person formed by my experiences in each of those life roles.

I admit that I speak different words and phrases as when talking to students than when talking to heads of companies. But both are required in my job. I spoke differently to my wife than to our young children. Even now, I speak differently in the role of worship leader, with a different tone and demeanor, than if we were all just sitting around having coffee. The different roles of life bring out these aspects of people. We have these expectations of one another and by behaving according to those norms, we build a trust that opens the door for communication.

As I stand before you today leading services, I can also say that I've not always been the best person in those different roles. My humanity has made me vengeful at times. It has made me jealous, angry, dishonest, or cruel. In all of those roles I have been emotions have driven my actions. Yet I still stand, called by this Synod, to serve as a worship leader.

There are those that believe that the presence of Christ in someone's life magically changes them. That "Christians" are suddenly the nicest, kindest, most loving and forgiving people you've ever met. If Christ is in your heart, you would never treat another person poorly. Well, one church league softball game will usually disabuse that idea for folks. Christians are still humans, with human emotions, actions, and shortcomings and always in need of the love of Christ.

Given that truth, it makes me think about Paul's admonition that he became as one of the people he was preaching the Gospel to. That itself can often be misconstrued. Paul isn't telling us to change who

we are at the core, rather to be willing to associate with those that need to hear God's love. Be accepted by them as someone who isn't there to condemn them, but to love them and show them a better way through love.

All too often we see someone having trouble and make one of two choices. Sometimes we go to them and offer them love, comfort, and companionship. But, depending on what that person has done, we do the opposite. We abandon them. We toss them aside. We do everything possible to avoid being associated with the person who has done the horrible thing.

That's tough. Because we do that as an act of our own self-preservation. If I'm seen associating with that person, then I'll be tossed aside too. I get that feeling. I've lived that feeling. But I've also lived the life of the one no one wanted to be around. Heck, I didn't want to be around me.

When all are gone and you are surrounded only by your worst fears and worst enemies, we find ourselves with Christ. He who died a public, shameful execution between two horrible thieves that had been tossed aside by society. We have all been there with him. The church when showing the cross often shows only one. But the other two matter. Jesus didn't die alone. Jesus died with criminals, people we don't usually admit to hanging out with. And certainly not people we admit to loving and wanting to become as them, in the words of Paul.

All too often we, especially with our American bootstraps attitude, believe in the tough love. Sometimes it is needed. Jesus walked away from his family when the town didn't want him preaching. Jesus told people the honest truth. But in a loving way, not in one coated and oozing of judgement. You can have all of the love in world trying to come out, but if you coat it in the oil of judgement it will never come through. Like a watertight barrier, the judgement will always stop the flow of the love.

When I've been in the depths of depression, it isn't the person who tells me to pick myself up and be cheerful who led me back, it was that person that sat beside me, in silence, letting God's love radiate with no words at all. When I'm hungry, the person telling me that if I had a better job I would be fine isn't getting through, the person feeding me is. When school is overwhelming because you are asked to teach kindergarteners art online for 50 minutes, the person who listens and lets you know that you've been heard is giving you a moment of God's love.

That can be tough. It is tough to be that person when you are surrounded by your own challenges. It is tough to be the vessel for God's love when you are seeking that outpouring yourself. And yet the thing we must remember is that it isn't us, it is God working through us to share love. Our job is to wipe away the human judgment and leave a space for love to flow.

Sometimes I'm not the right person. Sometimes I can't approach something without being judgemental, no matter how much I know it is wrong. Then maybe I'm not the vessel. That's okay.

On the other side, if you come loving when I'm not ready, you can have all the love in the world. I won't listen. I might need to be angry. I might need to be sad. Until I can get through those moments, I don't have room to notice love and caring, because I'm blinded by my own emotions. And that's okay

That's the beauty of our Isaiah reading!

28Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

29He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

God will wait us out. We can be stubborn, we can be irritable, we can be petulant children. And just like the child we will eventually give up, and God will still be waiting there. "You ready to be loved? I'm still here." Might be in the guise of a different person or different moment, but God will be there in some form or fashion.

One day you might see the beauty of God in the sunrise as never before, even though you see the sunrise each morning. In that moment, a little bit of love has seeped in. And then you might be open for more, maybe not. Maybe that filled all you can take. God will be okay and wait until you are ready for more.

We have to be that kind of patient with each other. And that's hard. Frankly that's harder with some than with others. Some folks may never be ready for a loving relationship. The absence of trust and the scars that it produces may block it. Yet God's love for another person is not predicated on my having to be the vessel. Someone will be there.

FYI- That's not an excuse to go on by saying "someone else will do it" when we are just too lazy, but that's another sermon.

Jesus ate with the tax collector. He talked to the unclean of society. He stayed with the outcasts in Bethany to show us that God will always be there for those that society won't. As the embodiment of God's love on earth today, it is now our job to find the ways to offer that love. Remembering that we are the vessel, the pathway, the conduit for God who is always ready to give us the strength. Because God's love and strength to love is greater than we will ever know.

Amen.