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Oct. 25, 2020

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
Reformation Sunday

John 8:31-36

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the source of all grace and peace. Amen.

Pastor Lynne invited me to use today as an opportunity to tell you some of my process in coming to be a Lay Pastoral Associate.

When I was a child, the pastor of my family's church was M.W. Tolo, a kind and gentle man. But his wife, Evelyn's, voice and laugh have stayed with me more. Like so many pastors' wives (because pastors were still always men), Evelyn was the church secretary, and an unpaid tireless worker. She had a broad smile that made her eyes sparkle. She seemed to me the picture of grace, warmly accepting everyone. I can still see her in the basement fellowship hall, listening intently in one-on-one conversations. I saw her as a one-woman support system for the congregation. I'm sure she was blissfully unaware that I was drawn to her.

I wanted to be like Evelyn Tolo. So in my childhood mind, I thought I wanted to be a pastor's wife. That was the only role I saw modeled in which a woman could have an active role in a church setting. My Sunday School teachers were women, but I didn't see them as having the same broad connection that Mrs. Tolo had. There was no such thing as a worship assistant in our congregations.

Fast-forward. At 31, I was recovering from a long illness and a divorce -- which I had believed I would NEVER have -- with a 5-year-old depending on me, and I had no clue what to do next. I thought again of church work. I had provided church music, I'd been a worship assistant. Maybe I could go to graduate school in Christian education and have a real, paying job for a congregation. Luther Seminary accepted my application to its two-year master's program.

One of my brothers worked on the seminary's campus. I talked to him, hoping for encouragement. Instead, he talked about the number of people -- women -- who seemed to come to school there in search of an "MRS degree." He cautioned me to be sure that wasn't my reason for going. It really was not -- I was not out to hunt for a husband. I was searching for a future for myself and my daughter through meaningful work of my own. But my brother's response triggered self-doubt; what if I did meet someone special at school? Would people assume that *I, too*, went there for an MRS degree?

In my recovery from illness, I still had very little energy or stamina, I was flat broke, and I could not imagine finding a way to fund graduate studies. So eventually, I told the admissions dept. at Luther Seminary to put my file in the inactive drawer.

Thirty years or so later, here, Pastor Lynne asked me to think and pray about joining the next Lay Pastoral Associate class. I had pondered the possibility since I moved to Lewistown and heard of the LPA program, but I was afraid to trust my interest. Maybe I needed someone else's invitation, or approval, to apply.

Since Pastor Lynne brought up the subject, I finally felt free to open the door to learning more through the LPA program. I didn't know what will come of it. I still don't, and that's OK.

The Greek word for disciple means learner. I want to always be a learner.

Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

The Judeans hearing these words from Jesus said, "Oh, no, we've always been free!" which could have triggered serious eye-rolling from Jesus. We know these people's ancestors were slaves to the Babylonians and Egyptians, and the people were currently under the Roman emperor's thumb. They were not always free.

It can be hard to recognize the boxes we live in when they are so familiar. We don't always recognize that we're NOT free. Fear, competition, money, stuff -- what has the power in our life decisions? Jesus said there's another way to live: Be real. Care. Love. Connect. Support. Give freely. LIVE freely, with love as our guide.

Recently, I read this from author Brené Brown: Caution: If you trade in your authenticity for being liked, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief.

In other words, trying to fake being who others think we should be isn't good for us. I have found this to be true.

We love our freedoms. But Luther said freedom is not complete if it is only freedom *from* whatever had us bound. He said freedom is only fully realized as freedom *for* something. We are freed from being self-centered, at the expense of others, to serve and give and love, no strings attached.

The world is full of people longing for freedom -- from oppression, the cycle of poverty, parental control, from prejudices that keep people on the margins.

I have been judged as too quiet, too sensitive, not fast enough, I think too much -- I've been told my choices are too honest. I have struggled to balance trying to change myself to win acceptance and being true to my own character and different abilities.

Pastor Lynne asked me how I have grown in the LPA learning process. How has God been at work in me? One way is that I am slowly, with the help of several resources, growing into the truth that beyond all previous judgements, I can be who I am AND offer the gifts I have. Luther said our vocation -- our personal calling to work that is meaningful for us -- is our greatest opportunity to exercise our freedom. And for me, as for many of us, work is most meaningful when it somehow contributes to the wellbeing of others and the world around us.

Self-disclosure like this is SO far out of my comfort zone. But if there is any part of my story that brings courage to someone to push doors open, I pray that God will make use of it for good.

Why are we so afraid to explore our God-given gifts?

When God helps me to see myself as I really am -- my faults AND my gifts, I can be free from the lies that say I'm not enough.

Believers become disciples by staying in relationship with Jesus, and letting his words challenge and change us. He does not simply forgive our self-centeredness; he promises to release us so we can follow him and walk his way of love.

Jesus is the pattern for our Christian freedom.

He is the one who shows us how to find our home in God.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

With confidence in God's grace and mercy, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

God of love, speak to your church. Guide us by your word to grow in faith as disciples of Christ. Give courage and the bond of love to all who gather in your name, that this love would turn toward our neighbors. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of justice, inspire leaders for truthful conversations and wise policies, that decisions are made for the good of all. Guide our nation's election process with fairness and good order. Bring peace in this world and restore wholeness among us. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God, our healer, come to our aid as COVID-19 continues to spread. Tenderly care for your children and nurse them to health. Bring relief to all in need of healing, hope, or restoration this day, especially those listed in our bulletin and those we name now in our hearts.

Wait

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of resurrection and life, we remember those who were dear to us and now rest in you, especially our sister Michelle Hecht. We give thanks for Martin Luther and all who seek to reform and renew your church. Give us courage to live out your gospel, revealing your love until our days on earth have ended. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Listen as we call on you, O God, and enfold in your loving arms all for whom we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.