

It has been a fascinating and meaningful journey for me over the past couple of months as I have immersed myself in the history of this congregation. Certainly there have been comical moments in our history, tragic moments, sinful moments. Our history is not one without flaw; that is for sure. If you examine our history you will see the role that pettiness has played in it. You will be caused to reflect on the way racism has impacted us. You will, without a doubt, note the way leaders in the church—clergy and lay—violated boundaries and exploited people. Our 145 years were not an experience of any one's definition of perfection.

In many ways, though, that is very old news. Brokenness is as old as **human** history. It has served to break down and to make old forever. What has been new news to me as I have reviewed our history—new in the sense that it created newness—has been the remarkable sacrifice, the phenomenal self-giving that has characterized our history. The first members of this congregation were Scandinavian immigrants who came to this country seeking a different life for themselves. They came by boats, “windjammers,” they were called. For the several week journey that it took to get to the United States they were required to bring their own food and bedding. The trips here often were marked by terrible storms and contagious disease. If and when they arrived in a place like Muskegon they faced a language they did not know, customs sometimes that were strange, and a lack of basic necessities. But they were determined, willing to pay a serious price for what they thought would be a better life.

They were determined to have a church, too. A church for them was a necessity for their life together. And so the Olsons, the Larsons,

the Nielsons, the Hansons, the Samuelsons, the Andersons, and a bunch of other “sons” helped to create a Lutheran church in 1864 in Muskegon during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Eventually these folks along with some other former Norwegians scraped together some money to build a church. Honestly, there wasn’t much money among these immigrants. But through the assistance of mill owners and local merchants **and** the great sacrifice of our congregation’s people, the Norwegian Lutheran Church of Muskegon was created and housed.

Actually, if you look at much of the history of our congregation you will frequently experience the theme of sacrifice and self giving. At several points in our history when buildings were being constructed many members took out a second mortgage on their homes to help fund the projects. And sometimes that occurred in the midst of very tough economic times. People gave in tough economic times, as we are called to give in tough economic times. Many people in our history had a sense that what this church and the gospel that it represented meant were so important that they gave up some of what they could have in their own lives for the sake of others, most particularly the community of faith.

“[Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?’”

We are at a turning point in the Gospel of Mark. Literally and figuratively we are at the center of this gospel. Jesus is making it quite clear who he is and what his life is to be about: “Then he began to

teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days, rise again. He said this quite openly.” To this point he has been telling people to keep his identity a secret. Even in the beginning of today’s reading he sternly orders Peter and the other disciples not to tell anyone who he truly is. Now the cat is out of the bag. He must suffer. He must be rejected. He must die. The Greek word for “must” here in Mark brings to mind a sense of divine necessity. For Jesus to live within who God is and what God is all about he **must** suffer and die.

Now to be honest, Peter doesn’t think too much of this “must-ness.” Peter starts to chastise Jesus for his words. “Come on, Jesus, there’s got to be another way. Forget this suffering stuff. Forget this rejection stuff.” Jesus responds to Peter as strongly as he ever does in the Bible, “Get lost, Satan. You have no idea how God works.”

Initially, Peter seemed to understand, seemed to get it. “You are the Christ,” he boldly confessed. You are the one we have been waiting for. You are the one who is the fulfillment of our dreams. You are the Messiah. You are the one who connects us to what God is up to. But Peter didn’t get what God is up to. Peter didn’t understand the heart of God as it is revealed in Jesus.

I am not sure we do either. We often respond just like Peter. For many of us, religion is what makes life bright and happy. It’s what answers the questions. It’s what takes the pain away. It’s what deals with the problem of suffering. But in Jesus we meet a different religion. We meet a different God. Jesus **must** suffer. Jesus **must** die. Paul Tillich says that the “Christ had to suffer and die, because whenever the Divine appears in all its depths it cannot be endured by [people].”

What a fascinating insight—an insight shared by our own Luther! In some ways, we humans can't stand love. It's hard to fathom. I would say that love makes us feel so vulnerable, so dependent, so much in need. And we would rather not be those things. And so we reject love. And so Jesus is rejected, is crucified. He **had** to be, the gospel of Mark says.

The God we talk about because of Jesus is One who takes upon himself the rejection and suffering of life. This religion that we meet in Jesus is not then a matter of answers to all the questions. It is not a matter of smiles plastered on all faces. It is not a matter of certainty. It is not life where suffering and pain are eliminated. In other words, it is not the easy place. To go where Jesus takes us is to go to the tougher place, the deeper place. It is to meet the suffering servant. It is to meet the suffering God, the God who takes upon himself the rejection that we dish out because we can't stand love and the rejection that life itself simply dishes out on a regular basis, for what seems sometimes to be no good reason.

God goes to the tough place, to the place of rejection, suffering, and death. That is what is at the center of our faith. That is what Jesus wants Peter to get. That is what enables us, frees us to realize that life lived best is not life lived protecting ourselves from pain, rejection, suffering, and even death. Life lived best is not life that tries to save one's own life, but life that loses itself for the gospel, that is, for the suffering heart of God. Life lived best is life lived risking taking up the cross and following Jesus. Life lived best is not life lived trying to avoid the hard spots. Sometimes life lived best is a matter of going into the hard places.

I think that many of our forefathers and foremothers understood that. They went into the hard spots. They got over themselves. They sacrificed. And look what new and great life came because they followed Jesus to the cross! By the way, you do note, don't you, that not only did Jesus say that he must be rejected, suffer, and die. He said that after three days he would *rise again*. The hard spot would give way to the place of beauty, wonder, and joy. Death would give way to resurrection. For 145 years we as First Lutheran congregation have experienced that over and over and over again. To follow Jesus to the cross is eventually to be taken to the place of true life.

Where are we going as a congregation? What's next for us? I'm not exactly sure. But this I do know: to follow Jesus into the future is to take the route that he went. He didn't take the easy way. He picked up the cross. And so, First Lutheran, that is our invitation. The suffering heart of God compels us not to go the easy route, not to avoid the hard places, not to reach out only to the folks who look and act like us, not to avoid risk, failure, or even controversy. No, we are to go where he went. We are to take up the cross. We are to go to those wild and wacky places to which love will take us. The journey won't be easy. The people might even be different than the ones we have known to this point. The risks will probably be great. But this is where Jesus goes. This is where the church who names him travels. And remember: in three days we will rise again.