

BISHOP'S SERMON
Synod Assembly
Friday, June 13, 2014

The Bishops Academy gives bishops and spouses the opportunity for mutual support and learning. The speakers can be challenging as they engage us in finding new ways of proclaiming the Gospel. The conversations among the bishops are about the intersection of faith and life in our particular contexts.

This past year we met in Savannah, Georgia. We worship each day together and on Sunday we divide into small groups and worship in area congregations. Ruth and I went to St. John Lutheran Church in Rincon, Georgia just north of Savannah.

It was a congregation about the size of many of our congregations, 60-70 for average worship attendance. The pastor led the liturgy graciously and proclaimed the Gospel clearly-though he did confess to some nervousness having two pews of bishops and spouses in attendance.

There was a potluck after worship. Tables and tables of food had been brought by the members. However, the food was a bit different than ours. No Jello. But they did have greens, ribs, black eyed peas and other Southern specialties.

On the bulletin board was the story of Ian, the son of Vice President Lisa. Lisa has given me permission to share her story with the leadership of our synod.

Lisa had visited a number of congregations before joining St. John. Those visits had not gone well. At the time, she had not yet known of her son's diagnosis of having a severe "sensory disorder." When he would have sensory overload, he did not simply have a little crying jag as toddlers can have, he would act out, loudly.

Lisa would leave worship as quickly as possible-but never quickly enough for some at each church she visited. She simply never got used to the stares or overhearing comments as she took her crying child out of church. And in at least one instance, she had to deal with a confrontation following worship from one of the members. She knew at each church that she and Ian would not be welcomed back if for no other reason than no one ever greeted them, welcomed them or invited them to return.

Finally Lisa accepted the reality that she and Ian would quite probably not be able to worship in public again...not hear the proclamation of the word or receive the sacrament or be an active part of the Christian community. She struggled to accept this.

Until Patrick posted a note on Facebook inviting Lisa and Ian to come to the congregational Easter egg hunt. She really didn't know much about Patrick, other than he was a Facebook friend but thought, "Let's give it a try."

The egg hunt was a bit more than Ian could take. There was no screaming but the sensory overload this time caused him to freeze. He simply could not move. That is when the members

of the congregation quietly came to him and started to place Easter eggs in his basket. One after another until his basket was full.

Then Patrick, who turned out to be Pastor Patrick Finley, invited Lisa and Ian to worship. Well, OK. We can try. She explained their situation and the pastor again extended the invitation.

When they attended worship the next Sunday, the sensory overload was again too much for Ian and he had no choice but to cry loudly. Lisa dashed out of worship with him...and no one stared. Not a one. No one made any comments to overhear. No one scolded.

After worship, the members greeted her warmly, thanked her for attending and invited her and Ian to worship with them next week.

Lisa is now the Vice President of the congregation. And Ian is able to go up front for the children's message...because a community of believers broke through the walls and the locked doors of Lisa's and Ian's lives to welcome, include, accept and witness, to speak the peace of Christ to them in a time of need, using the communication tools of our day to reach out and invite someone to join with them in experiencing the Gospel message that is eternal.

The disciples know this same story. They gathered in an upper room with walls and a locked door in fear for what would happen next and how they would be treated outside of those walls. So, they hovered in fear-until Jesus showed up-not limited by the walls and the locked door of fear-Jesus shows up with the message of peace.

We all have those walls and locked doors that can keep us huddled in fear. You know them all too well. Sometimes they can haunt us in the middle of the night. They may haunt you at night. They may keep you from knowing the peace of Christ.

But we are here tonight, and in our home congregations on Sunday, because we also know that there are no walls, no locked door of fear that can stop Jesus from coming to us and giving us peace.

Knowing this peace, we are strengthened for witness and service-to invite and welcome, to accept and to grant God's peace to Lisa and Ian and each person locked in rooms of fear and uncertainty. "Peace be with you" we say with our words and lives. We know that peace and we simply cannot stop ourselves from sharing it with others.

The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Amen.