

One of the questions I get asked most as a pastor is *how*, how did you find yourself here, in this particular vocation, usually followed by some variation on—I would *never* want to do that job. There are a variety of versions of this story, because after you've told it 1,000 times you have to mix it up a little bit, but at the heart of it lies one place and two people—St. John Lutheran Church in Dundee, Michigan and Marty and Angela Zimmann. Marty and Angela came to St. John when I was starting seventh grade, we were a small congregation, just kind of doing our thing like any church in a tiny, farming town does. Sunday school, Easter breakfast, traditional worship, the usual. Within easily three years of Marty and Angela starting, we were the fastest growing rural congregation in the ELCA. Now there were a lot of factors that went into that, but for me and my journey, it rested very clearly on Marty and Ang and what they brought to the table when it came to ministry.

These were the pastors that were ok with me rolling into Wednesday night service sweaty and gross because I had just come from volleyball practice. They didn't care what I was wearing, they cared that as a high schooler with a busy practice schedule, I was still *showing up*. They were the ones who told our youth group that we were taking a mission trip to Washington DC, staying at a church in Anacostia and working with their

community. Now, full disclosure, I didn't get to go on that trip, but it still happened. When the high school Sunday school class wasn't really hitting for me, they were the ones who said I could join the adult class with Jennifer and were the first people to put Elie Wiesel's *Night* in my hands and take all of us to the Holocaust Museum after having lengthy and honest conversations about Christian/Jewish relations and the horrors of the world when humanity plays into its less than better angels. In the weeks after 9/11, we had prayer services and open conversation, one of which was about the atrocity of the one Indian family in Dundee being attacked by having their tires slashed because they had brown skin. During the war in Iraq, every Sunday we read the names of every soldier killed and we prayed for their families. I watched Marty write op-eds to our little newspaper in town, *The Independent* about things going on in town. Suddenly, for me, and for a lot of people at St. John, God wasn't just in our sanctuary, church wasn't just about worship; God was in the world, in our neighbor, in current events, and church was who we were when we were together, no matter where that happened to be.

I've been thinking a lot about this time over the last week because I think we all can think back to a time in our lives when something clicked. When something made sense. When our eyes were opened and we saw the

world from a broader perspective. Our faith was malleable and open to new things and it dared to ask questions of where and how God was showing up in the world. And I think we all would say that this time in our lives is vital. We love seeing it in our kids—when they preach on Confirmation or share things that they experienced at youth events—we’re excited for them, we want to hear what they think, but...I think we all also know that something happens when we get older...something happens where suddenly all those things that invigorated us as kids, all those things that were transformative when we were teenagers, we find reasons to say they were fleeting moments, childish, not serious...and we find all sorts of reasons why we need to hunker down into what the world, what the church is supposed to be and there is no way we’re going to change that. And into that mentality, our lessons bring us...Isaiah.

I said it last week and I’ll say it again, the lectionary is relentless right now. It is hammering home the heart and soul of what God calls God’s people to and if you are feeling the weight of that, trust me, I would imagine the Israelites were too, but they couldn’t avoid it either. So once more, my friends, unto the breach because God has a lot of things to say, we just might not want to hear them.

The Israelites have just recently returned from exile in Babylon where they have spent generations trying to return to right relationship with God after things had gone so catastrophically off the rails. They get back and you just have to hope they've figured it out, right? Well...shock of shocks, they haven't. After such a short period of time, here we are again with the Israelites *whining* because God isn't paying enough attention to them. They sound like toddlers. We're doing all of these things and you don't care! Look at our fasting! Look at how humble we are! Look at everything we're doing for you and you just want to ignore us!

You can just imagine God's reaction, right? Yeah, it's not good. God essentially scoffs, this nation wants my attention? *As if* they were a nation who practiced righteousness?! God points out their fasting is selfish, an excuse to be cranky and overwork their laborers. Humility isn't exactly humble if you're saying look how humble I am. And in fact, they know what God has asked of them, the fasts they are called to, and they're ignoring all of those calls. God says they should be fasting from injustice, giving their bread to the hungry, finding shelter for the poor, letting the oppressed go free. When they do these things and call out to God, God will respond here I am! Fully available, fully vulnerable, fully present. They should be pouring out their souls for the sake of their neighbor and instead

they're getting caught up in the things they think they should be doing, which is really just code for the things that they want to do, the things that are easy, that make them look good and like they're dotting the I's and crossing the t's of their faith.

Somewhere along the line of life, we all fall into this and we think that we're right. We think that we've finally got it figured out, this God thing, what it takes to be in right relationship with God, and rarely does it have anything to do with what God has actually called us to. In fact, especially in the world we live in, if we talk about the things God has called us to, the church gets accused of being political, of putting words in Jesus' mouth, of focusing on worldly things, not spiritual things. But right here, we have God saying justice is spiritual. Caring for the poor is spiritual. Feeding the hungry, freeing the oppressed, sheltering the homeless—all those things that some people would say are just handouts—are deeply, deeply spiritual and in fact what our relationship with God is all about. It's not about how much we pray, how much we fast, even how much we come to worship. If we aren't being about the work of caring for one another then worship is pointless because it is empty, it is performative. When we start saying that current events, our political climate, the fate of our neighbors has nothing to

do with us and certainly shouldn't be mentioned in church then we have grossly forgotten who our God is and how God shows up in the world.

It means we have forgotten that John the Baptist was arrested for calling out the bad behavior of political leaders. That Jesus spent the majority of his time feeding people, healing people, and raking the governing authorities over the coals. That Paul dared to use the very things the Roman empire claimed they stood for against them, by saying that the only peace that was legitimate was God's peace and that Pax Romana was a lie. That Mary and Joseph had to live as refugees in Egypt until it was safe to come back to their homeland. Every time we try to say that talk of justice has no place here, only worship does, the words, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness resounds.

I found meaning in church, in my faith, when my pastors not only saw me, but started talking about the real ways in which faith has implications in the world, where God calls us to. I want you to remember that feeling you had when you were a teenager or in your twenties, that fire in your belly feeling that *called* to you. That feeling that so often gets quieted, stamped out because it isn't dignified or comfortable or appropriate. Who we were in those moments? That is when our faith was ready to be a light, a beacon, and somewhere along the way, adulthood starts being a bushel we hide our

light under, because we don't want things to be uncomfortable, we don't want God interfering in our political beliefs, we want things to be simple. We want right relationship to be a few words of prayer and a Sunday morning. Somewhere along the way we get lost, we think that easy equates with the gospel and anything else is just trying to rock the boat, but y'all, Jesus has never found a boat he wouldn't rock or a table he wouldn't flip over, and our world is filled with tables that need flipping over.

Every single day our siblings are crying out for justice, to be seen, to be heard, to be accepted, to have someone stand with them and say I hear you and I will walk with you. The hungry have everything to do with us. The displaced, the undocumented, the fearful have everything to do with us. The kids kicked out of their houses for being gay have everything to do with us. The prisoners who have been given extreme sentences to make a point but really it's about the color of their skin have everything to do with us. Feel the fire of your youth burning in your chest. Hear the word of God calling you out into the world to *do something* with the word you have heard. Dare to want to be called the repairer of the breach, the one who scattered the gloom. Dare to go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, letting your light so shine before others so that your God in heaven may be glorified. **AMEN!!!**