

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

Luke 24:13-35
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
April 23, 2017

KIDS' MESSAGE

What do you like best about God/Jesus?

- Created everything, including us.
- Became a person like us at Christmas.
- Fed hungry people, cured sick people, forgave sinful people...
- Died on the cross to show us how much God loves us.
- Came back from the dead to forgive us and to give us eternal life.
- Always with us and helping us no matter what.
- Loves us even more than our parents/grandparents do...

What does God like best about you?

- Nice person, friendly, help at home, try hard at school, love God, pray, worship...

What do you like best about our church?

- Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Tiny Tots.
- Kids' Messages, singing, special music.
- Nice people who care about us...

What does God like best about our church?

- Nice worship, good prayers, good singing...
- Help people with food shelf, community meal, soup kitchen...
- Welcome people, invite to coffee hour
- Visit when sick...
- Love God back...

And I think that God likes that we are here together today. And I think that God is excited about the different ways that we might love and trust God in the future. And about the different ways that we might love and serve other people in the future. God is so good. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

You know how in most churches, you come in the door for worship and you find the back pews packed to the gills, and the front pews totally empty? I was in a church like that thirty three years ago when our family was on vacation. We arrived just a little bit late and the service had already begun. From what we could see, the back pews were packed, so we went to the side aisle and began to quietly make our way toward the front. Then, third pew from the back, Jennifer spotted a pew where only one man sat in the middle of the pew. In we went!

The pews all around us were packed, yet here this man sat alone. In a glance I saw that the man was not very well dressed or cleanly shaven, that perhaps he was a little differently-abled. During the entire service the man didn't say a word, didn't sing, and didn't bother anyone. He stood up and sat down whenever it was appropriate to do so. Yet, in a packed church, he had been sitting alone. . .

Later that afternoon, I asked our then-four-year-old son, **John, what he had liked best about that church.** I expected he would surely pick out the beautiful stained glass windows behind the altar. Maybe he would mention the fine organ or the beautiful solo or the comfortable, padded pews, surely something like that. Here's what John liked best about the church that we worshiped at that morning. **"The man who sat next to me."** Taken aback by his answer, I asked him, **"Why?"** John responded, **"When I smiled at him, he smiled back at me!"** It was the man who sat alone in the pew that John liked best about that church. . .

Do you know who that was sitting next to 4 year old John? It was **Jesus!** Jesus visited that church the Sunday after Easter, and nobody recognized him but a small boy. Jesus was there, and nobody recognized him but a small boy.

The disciples didn't recognize Jesus on that first Easter day either. In our Gospel text for today, we are told that they were walking along the road, broken and sad. Jesus came and joined them as they walked along, but their eyes weren't opened to recognize him. They were living as though Jesus was still dead and buried.

When Jesus asked them what they were talking about, they explained their misery and said, “**But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.**” They had hoped Jesus would save them and their nation. Now, they were living as if Jesus, their only hope, was dead.

That’s how we sometimes live too I think. . . We live as if Jesus had never risen from the grave, as if there is no God. The people that Jesus came to love and claim, like the man alone in the pew, we ourselves sometimes reject and despise, or simply neglect or ignore. Then, being a part of rejecting or neglecting others, we ourselves experience that same kind of rejection and neglect from still others. Rejecting our neighbor is rejecting Jesus. Both rejections cost us dearly.

Those many years ago, the service was over and the man in the pew was gone. There was no time to say “hello” or “goodbye.” He was gone. Was he lonely? Did he feel unwanted? Had he learned from past experience that it didn’t pay to stick around after church, because of stares or because of being ignored? Did he miss out on something at that church that day? Did he experience God’s love?

The two disciples in our text didn’t recognize Jesus when he walked with them two thousand years ago on that first Easter. To this very day, we also sometimes fail to recognize Jesus walking with us. Thirty three years ago, our family was on vacation. So was the pastor at the church we visited. All of us go on vacation sometimes. We may not make it to worship with our sisters and brothers in Christ when we are gone on vacation. **But**, and **this is really, really big – GOD NEVER TAKES A VACATION FROM US!**

Nobody seemed to care about that man in the pew, but God did. Sometimes, perhaps far too often, nobody seems to care about you and your suffering or pain. But God does. Today, **Cody Buchite** and **Zeke Moss** were baptized and God cares deeply about both of them. It was God who brought them here today. And God will leave with them when the service is over. And God will lovingly pursue them all the days of their lives, constantly calling them to trust God to love and

care for them. And the same is true for Zeke's parents, grandparents, great grandparents, for you, for me and for everyone here.

Jesus cared about those two grieving disciples walking along that road. God broke into their gloom as the **Living Lord of Life**. Jesus won victory over sin, death and evil. Jesus gave them **new hope** and **new life!** First Jesus told them his story, then he fed them and finally, they believed. Jesus does the very same thing for us today – **tells his story, feeds us** and **invites us, once again, to trust in him.**

God cares about that man in the pew. Jesus, the one who had suffered all things, the one who is no stranger to our own sufferings, Jesus comes to live with that man in the pew. And Jesus gives him forgiveness, love and the promise of everlasting life – no matter what! And Jesus can do that even if the other people around the man don't show it to him, even if he didn't sing a single hymn or speak a single word.

So also, **God is for you.** Jesus pursues you all of your life, even if you don't give a damn about him. And every time Jesus breaks in and has God's way, you too receive that forgiveness, love and promise of everlasting life – no matter what!

What's so good about the "**Good News of Jesus Christ?**" It's that Jesus **lived, died, rose again** and **still lives for the man in the pew,** for **Cody** and **Zeke** and for **you.**

Jesus meets us here. Jesus meets us here where we gather for worship. That's Jesus' promise, "**Wherever two or three gather in my name, I will be with them.**" This is the place where Jesus has **promised to meet us in the flesh.** Jesus could have been in the differently-abled fellow who sat alone in that church thirty three years ago. Jesus could have been in the little boy who smiled at him. Today, Jesus could be in the person who is dancing around up front. Or Jesus could be in the person who is sitting behind you. Or Jesus could be in you.

For sure, Jesus is in the **scripture** we read and in the words of the **sermon** you are hearing. If anything good ever comes out of the words that I, or any other pastor preaches, it is “**thanks be to God.**” **Jesus speaks to us through the Word.** Jesus is Living Word. Jesus is here today to speak to your heart and mine.

And for sure, Jesus comes to us through the **sacraments** of baptism and communion. In **Holy Baptism**, Jesus literally splashes water and embraces that person to **claim and adopt** them into God’s precious and beloved family of faith. In Holy Baptism, God gifts each person with the life-long presence of the **Holy Spirit** to keep us in faith and to guide us in life. In **Holy Communion**, Jesus, again and again brings **forgiveness and healing** for broken hearts and souls. Jesus **feeds and shapes** us, **fills and renews us** in God’s family. In Holy Communion, Jesus empowers us for **living life well** – in our **hearts** and **minds** and out in that **world**.

Yes, Jesus is present in our deer stand, in our fishing boat, in our sewing room. Yes, Jesus is present in our bedroom, in our workplace, in the jail cell, in the hospital room, classroom and at the playground or campground. But it is just plain **easier to see, hear and know Jesus** where he **faithfully speaks to us** through the Word. It is easier to know that Jesus is with us where we can **literally touch him in the water, wine and bread.**

I will be direct. God is everywhere present, but **this is the place where we can most clearly see, hear and believe that God is here to love, care, forgive, heal, embrace and give us abundant, joy-filled life now and forever.** **This is the place where, without a doubt, we are always welcome, wanted and loved by God.**

Welcome home dear sister and brother. You came to the **right place.** **When you smile at God, God’s already been smiling at you for a long, long time.** Thanks be to God. Amen.