

Radical Joy
Sermon by Vicar Tamika Jancewicz
Sunday, May 13, 2018
Easter 7
Luke 24.44-53

This past Friday, I was able to witness the ordination of Pastor Lenny Duncan into the Metropolitan New York Synod. Lenny and I haven't known each other for too long, but I consider him a dear friend and brother. He's a black man from Philadelphia who is never afraid to share his story of recovery from addiction, his life of homelessness, and other traumatic experiences of his youth, and while that is not all of who he is by any means, knowing these parts of his life and how God reached into the deepest crevices of his life and how he experienced God's full grace in his most desperate times, made Friday so incredibly beautiful. It was a sight to behold as many of his friends—who witnessed his transformation, and growth, and knew his story—shared tears of joy as we heard “Let it be acclaimed that Leonard Duncan Jr is a called and ordained minister in the church of Christ...” We were all, in that moment, with great joy and blessing God that God has once again showed mercy and grace to the church through the gift of Lenny Duncan. It was a new beginning and we are all better for it. And as my friend, Pastor Jason Chesnut lovingly reminded me afterwards, “no matter what happened in that service it was apparent that the Holy Spirit was there with us in that moment.” So true. She was there, indeed.

And I imagine that the disciples shared such joy in their hearts as they watched Jesus ascend into the heavens, blessing them as he went up. We hear of Jesus' ascension in our gospel reading and in our second reading in Acts. Both the ending of the gospel attributed to Luke and the beginning of the book of Acts is leading up to what we will celebrate next week, Pentecost, where the promise to be clothed in power, is realized. The Holy Spirit—that same one that filled our hearts on Friday night—was promised to cloth the disciples with power on high. It was with this promise that Jesus leads the disciples to Bethany, and blesses them, continually, while he withdrew and was carried up. I imagine that it was those comforting words and Jesus' calling on God's power to be with the disciples is what gave them that great joy that they had as they returned to Jerusalem for the beginning of something new. And that great joy caused them to bless God in the temple, as they awaited what was to come.

One of my favorite authors is Brené Brown. We read her newest book “Braving the Wilderness” for Conversations on faith and life on Wednesday nights during lent. Brown says something very profound about the feeling of joy. She says that joy is probably one of the most vulnerable emotions we experience because often times when we feel joy, soon after most people are anticipating something going wrong, and so they put their armor on to keep from feeling, or just plain ignore the feeling altogether. Has anyone ever experienced anything like this? Where something incredibly wonderful happens, and you just anticipate what could possibly go wrong to take away that joy you have in that moment? Or when you hear good news, and you wait to hear the bad news which is surely to follow? I believe it’s common for many of us, right? And so, Brown encourages people to practice gratitude whenever they feel joy, which can be a very vulnerable thing to do. And with that in mind, it seems in this moment as the disciples experience Jesus withdrawing from them, a very vulnerable and probably scary moment for them, they find joy in their hearts. So they practice this particular feeling with gratitude by blessing God. Think of how that must have prepared them for the very real hard times that are to follow—persecutions, marginalization, fear for their lives, uncertainties of how to teach this new gospel of Christ. All of that was not far behind, but instead of putting up their armor they held on to that joy for the time they could. How brave. How radical. A radical joy, if you will.

I wonder what it would look like if we all practiced this radical joy more often in our lives. How would that look? What transformations would occur for so many of us if we navigate our lives with more gratitude and radical joy in this time where we are all told you are either for us or against us on whichever side of the political spectrum you land? I imagine it looks like us fully enjoying God’s awesome gift to us as we welcome baby Tristan into our community, because once again God has blessed us here at Christ Lutheran with another human being to love and care for, and more importantly, God has shown grace through Tristan’s baptism into the faith and we are invited to be a part of his growth in Christ. It is a new beginning on this occasion and we can all practice that radical joy.

In an interview most recently Brené Brown offers up that because joy is such a vulnerable emotion to experience, that what we need is more safe spaces for people to feel as the disciples did, and as so many of us did on Friday at Lenny’s ordination, and all of us will feel in a few

minutes. A place where people can take off their armors and where she says “we need to know joy, and successes. A place of belonging, a place where empathy resides, and where people can practice the adaptability to change.” A place where we all experience the fullness and hope that joy gives us.

Once I heard Brown say this, it brought me back to the council meeting last week, where the members of the church council have been prayerfully considering what’s next here at Christ Lutheran. How do we as a community live out what we see God calling us to be? And as someone who was there more as an active listener and observer, I have to tell you that it was definitely one of those spaces that Brene Brown was trying to explain. We all sat and expressed the many ways we see God moving here, and it came down to the simple idea of forming and building relationships within our community that allows for us to be more intentional in listening to one another and discovering the many gifts already here. The Holy Spirit was once again ever present in that meeting as everyone talked candidly and openly together. It was a living into being a place with no walls, always learning. Always growing. However uncomfortable that felt at first. And what radical joy we can have together as we live into that fully. Imagine truly being a safe space where people, both current and future, can come and fully experience joy without fear of the walls collapsing in on them. Can you see it? Have you already experienced a glimpse of it here or elsewhere? I have.

And beloveds, this is where I think we can take away from this Ascension Sunday. That joy, that radical joy that caused the tears to flow on Friday, as those present witnessed another Holy Spirit-filled moment of God’s grace realized in the ordination of Pastor Lenny Duncan. That joy, that radical joy, we will experience minutes from now as we welcome baby Tristan into our community, with the hope that as he grows up, but not too quickly, am I right, Rebecca and Pierre? that Tristan will grow to see how God is ever present in his life, and that he is fully loved and embraced here and wherever he goes in the world. That joy, that radical joy as we continually become the community we know God is calling us to be here in and outside of these walls. That we are equipped to be that safe space that Brene Brown was talking about, practicing gratitude for the small victories and joyful occasions without fear of the walls collapsing in on us. And we can extend these safe spaces to those who desperately need it beyond these walls and

the surrounding community. And so we join in with the disciples as they experience Jesus withdraw and ascend up into the clouds, not forever but for a time. This is not the end of an era, but a new beginning. Maybe that too was what the disciples were grateful for. It wasn't the end as they were sadly probably thinking when they witnessed Jesus up on that cross. But here in this moment, they experienced this joy for what was promised—A power from on high. A new beginning we can all look forward to as the Holy Spirit brings new life into our community and into our world. Amen. And Amen again.