

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

*EASTER PEOPLE: Living our lives shaped by what He has done for us*

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Colossians 3: 12-17.

Something is obviously missing in the chapel this morning. If you were here during the long weeks of Lent, you recall the ugly rugged cross that stood here in the middle of the aisle, encircled with that horrible circle of branches from the Hawthorne tree. I look at those and shudder. How horrible it must have been. Ouch! But Good Friday has come and gone. Mel Gibson's depiction may be more gory than we usually think of, but at least we know it was not a garden party, it was an execution with the attendant anger and flailing, etc.

But we are now in the celebration phase. We have just celebrated the wonderful news of the Jesus' Resurrection. Hallelujah! He is risen! And you respond: "He is Risen Indeed!"

As we reflect on these things, and I admit for me it is always a highly emotion-packed week. We now realize that so much has been done for us..... Just for you! Just for me!

How can we respond to that? Theoretically, the answer is: "With Nothing". It has all been done for us. God's Grace is sufficient and we have to just sit here and do nothing! We all know Martin Luther called this "cheap grace" - we need to do something in response. Pastor John Christopherson's Easter sermon last Sunday was entitled: "Where is the Body?" A major point was that Jesus' body had arisen and how WE are the Body of Christ. We are the Church!

Psychologists divide people into different groups based on their personality styles. Some are thinkers. I call them hypotheticizers. Others are doers. Sometimes those are ferrets. Some are summarizers or enablers, etc. Most of us like to respond to good deeds by doing one ourselves. You know, someone invites you over for dinner, you feel not obligated, but excited about reciprocating. We do it because we want to, not have to.....and so on.

How can we, the Body of Christ, respond to what the Lord has done for us.?

It doesn't take long to realize that this campus has understood this message for a long time. We have come from a long tradition of people who leave this place and enter service-type positions, teachers, pastors, health professionals, etc. And, we have a real love to get involved in service projects. After all, we have all seen those little feet on the blackboards around campus with the date 4-24-04 on them. That's Community Service Day. Hundreds of Augustana people will spill into the community to rake lawns, wash windows, pound nails, etc. We DO things for others without expecting anything back. We are involved. But do we think of this each day, each week, or just once a year? You have heard the phrase: "Commit a random act of kindness"! Daily! It will make a difference in our world. It will make the world a better place.

I am a Stephen Minister at First Lutheran. I have been for about 8 years. One of the things we have been asked to do is hospital visits. Yes the staff - pastors- visit the hospitals and they cover four days a week. The fifth is given to volunteers such as the Stephen Ministers. I must confess that I have a hard time walking into the hospital room of someone I really do not know, finding the person in a vast array of situations - sprawled on a hospital bed with casts on this limb or that, tubes stuck in arms, in mouths or up noses.... it is uncomfortable for me many times. Perhaps some of you would also find it difficult. But perhaps a smile, a word of encouragement or an opportunity to share a short prayer might give that patient a ray of sunshine for the few moments we share.

I must digress a bit and share some of my own personal story. Many of you know it. I grew up in Eastern Colorado, spent four years being educated at Augustana College, followed by graduate studies at Purdue where I worked in two research groups, the first I hated and transferred out of, the second I loved and prospered in for about four years. I met a young lady from Fargo, as in North Dakota, and we were married at the beginning of my third year of graduate studies. Then three years later, when she had finished her graduate studies, we celebrated the birth of our first child, a boy named Erik.

I finished my grad studies and found a good job at another ELCA school, Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. Again, we found a nice three-bedroom house adjacent to campus and we set about to enjoy our early years of working with students. Two years later, our second son, Nathan, was born and we were really celebrating the beauty of family life.

But then nine months later, the bottom dropped out. Erik became ill. He just wasn't prospering, didn't eat well, didn't look right. The doctor said he had a virus and gave us an antibiotic, of course. Some weeks later he had a crash - emergency room, blood tests, deadly diagnosis: acute Lymphocytic Leukemia. Our child, not yet three years of age, was given a death sentence. The doctor said the average child in 1970 lived two years with this disease, and almost none survived for five years. We began to mourn, even though he was still alive. How can we hold our lives together with a new, nine-month old baby when our 3 year old was not going to live? From the heights of anticipation and excitement to the depths of despair! We felt alone. Sandy and I are both only children. We lived 1000 miles from her parents in Fargo, 1000 miles from my parents in Colorado. We felt so alone!

But we were not alone! We began to see our friends come in support. One very special person was our baby-sitter.

I must tell you about Muz. The widow of a retired Lutheran pastor, she was the mother-in-law of our family doctor. He had introduced her to me at a basketball game the night our second son was born. She was recently widowed and lonely. She loved little kids, especially babies. She was the perfect grandmother type. Oh, she was a rather tall and portly lady, not particularly beautiful, her teeth were a bit crooked in front and she wore heavy glasses. She drove her own little white Rambler and lived across the street from Schiller Park in the German Village area of Columbus. Anyway, she would often come and just stay to take care of Nathan when we were at the hospital. And Erik was hospitalized for a total of more than three months during those two years. She would come and take care of both children and tell Sandy and I: "Go out for an evening. Get away. Don't worry about us."

Somewhere near the end of that illness, a random act of kindness appeared in the mail. Just when we thought we could not go on financially, we got a Cashier's Check for \$250 in the mail. The postmark was somewhere in Tennessee, and you don't have to sign a cashier's check, you know. Thus we could not figure out who had been so kind as to send us this large amount of money. Back then \$250 would make \$1000 today, perhaps more.

Although we will never know, and we never really put her on the spot to ask her, I shall always 'know' it was sent by Muz. Later we found out one of her kids had been on a road trip through that part of the world, and I am sure she had arranged it. What a perfect way to be totally anonymous.

When our son died, she came to us and said: "Where are you going to bury him?" We had really never thought of that. We were not 'native' to Ohio, and so perhaps we would make those arrangements in North Dakota or Colorado. She said: "My family has a plot in Greenlawn Cemetery, and my parents are there, my husband is there. There is place for me and one other. My children all have plans to be buried elsewhere. I would feel honored to be buried next to my Erik. Would you like to use the extra space in our family burial plot?" And so we did. What joy to know they are side by side. We have gone on with our lives. We adopted a daughter, then had another child of our own. We have them now pretty much raised and educated. Yet we often think of the wonderful blessings of Muz. She took seriously the charge to put on compassion and kindness, meekness and patience. Whatever she did, she did in the name of her special Lord. We thank God for Muz. She made our lives bearable. She stood with us through all those tough times.

I must admit, it has been fun to send a cashier's check or two to people in need. I love it because nobody can ever find out who to thank.....

As some of you know, I took a giant leap of stupidity off my garage roof last November and broke both bones in my leg. After several days in the hospital, I went home to catch the Type A flu. Thus I was pretty much out of the academic loop for some time. Yet my classes never missed a beat. Both the freshman lecture and the Organic lecture were covered by my longsuffering colleagues in the department. Ditto for the labs. Even unit exams and finals were prepared by these angels, even if they did bring the exams to me for grading..... It would have been impossible to keep things together if it weren't for special colleagues in the Chemistry department. Those were "programmed acts of kindness" and I won't soon forget! Thank you, colleagues! How can I ever repay you?

I challenge you to look for opportunities to inject yourself into the lives of others and make a real difference. You have much to share. Not to earn God's favor, but as a thanks for what Jesus has done for us. Do it in response to God's grace.

Amen.

