



# Pastor Laurie Skow-Anderson's Message

## May 24, 2020

### **Memorial Day /Ascension Day/Graduation** **John 17, Acts 1, 1 Peter**

Hello People of God of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. I'm Pastor Laurie Skow-Anderson; I serve as the bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. On Sunday, May 24, we remember Jesus' ascension into heaven. He is lifted up into heaven, into the clouds. Just before he leaves the disciples, Jesus commissions them to be his witnesses. He says, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Let's think about the mission that Jesus gives us, his disciples today. How can we live out that commission even as we are challenged by the dangers of the Coronavirus? How can we "go to the ends of the earth," when we still need to be careful, stay home and avoid group gatherings? The Wisconsin Council of Churches and the six ELCA Bishops in Wisconsin still encourage everyone to stay safe and make decisions that are in the best interest of your neighbor's health.

Because of COVID 19, your pastors and church leaders have had to make some major decisions in the way they do ministry. The synod staff, synod ministers, just like your congregation, had to make huge adjustments in our work during this pandemic. We are working from home using Zoom meetings, Face Book Live, creating video recordings and other resources for you. I want to express by deep gratitude to the Synod Ministers who have adapted and adjusted their work to serve you. Thank you to our administrator Liz Bartsch, Pastors Greg Kaufmann, Erin Nelson, Randy Olson, Deacons Laura Ramlow, and David Behling. We are here to help you so that together the next generation will come to know and love Jesus!

Thank you to YOU, the 198 ELCA congregations in the NW corner of the state of Wisconsin, for your faithfulness in following Jesus during these strange days. I am particularly thankful for the ministries of our four Bible camps and the challenges they face. Luther Point, Luther Park and Wappagassette made the tough decision to cancel Bible camp this summer. Pray for them as they learn ways to help our kids learn to love Jesus without the kids actually coming to camp this summer. Keep them in your prayers. My concern, as we all long for things to go back to normal, is that we don't turn inward and look only to our own self-interests and our own personal preferences, but to think about the bigger picture, and seek the common good. What is best for others? What is the best way for us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves? What is God's will for our lives together?

The COVID 19 Pandemic has affected all of us in different ways.

- Many struggle financially. They have lost their jobs or their businesses have suffered
- Parents are stressed working at home and homeschooling their young children.
- Some cannot visit older loved one living in senior assisted living. I've seen families standing outside a nearby nursing home visiting with their grandma or grandpa through the window!
- Some are the disappointed high school graduates, class of 2020, no way to celebrate.
- Me personally, I've not been able to see my granddaughter since this all began, because my daughter-in-law is pregnant with baby #2 and they are concerned about the virus. My second grandchild is due in June, and I think about that baby curled up safe inside its mother's womb in a fetal position. What kind of world will it be born into? Sometimes it seems to me that we are all curled up in a fetal position. When we are anxious and uncertain about the future it is so easy to become inwardly focused.

My heart especially goes out the high school seniors who lost the last few months with their classmates and teachers and whose plans for graduation celebrations has been cancelled or postponed. I remember when I graduated from high school in May a long time ago. I spent the summer working and getting ready to go to college. I was a scared college freshman maybe more than most. I was terrified of failing. I was a farm kid, never been to the big city, the oldest child, the first in my family to go to college, and I picked a college 300 miles from home. The first few weeks at college I was just completely focused on not getting lost, finding my way to class on time and doing homework and not failing. Walking to class every day, I took the same sidewalk between the dorms and library commons to the classroom building. The sidewalks were usually filled with students coming and going from class. I kept my head down and purposefully walked to class. I was determined not to be late and not to fail. Did I mention I was really afraid of failing?

One day I was walking back to my dorm from the library along my usual route and I noticed a leaf falling. I was surprised by the leaf and looked up and was equally surprised to see I was standing under an enormous tree. In all those weeks of walking to class with my head down, I had never seen the tree. The trunk was this big and the branches were high overhead. It was a really big tree and I'd missed it. I hadn't noticed it at all. Even though I had walked past it dozens of times in those first few weeks of college, I was too intent, so inwardly focused on myself, and too afraid to look up and notice the amazing tree. In some ways this is a stupid story. The fact that I didn't notice a tree isn't important, but what the story is really about is being self-absorbed and self-centered caring only about myself, my success, my needs and not noticing the whole world around me. I was turned in on myself, or as one of my teachers said, I was navel gazing. Theologians call this self-centeredness, a form of pride, the original sin or in Latin *incurvatus en se*, curved in on oneself.

In the three years that Jesus' disciples follow him. They were like self-conscious freshman, thinking about their own needs and survival. Jockeying for position, James and John asked Jesus, "Which one of us will sit at your right and your left hand in glory?" In our reading from Acts 1, it is 40 days after Easter, 40 days after Jesus' suffering death on the cross, it is 40 days since Easter morning and his first appearance to the women at the tomb. Jesus appeared to them many times and they've had all this time to remember the miracles, healings, the teaching of Jesus. But those closest to Jesus, his closest friends still don't know what to do next. They asked him, "Is now THE TIME?" Is now the TIME when Jesus was going to claim his earthly powers and put them in power and overthrow the Romans. They've been waiting for the time when their lives would improve, go back to normal, or at least to a time when they wouldn't be suffering under brutal Roman occupation and persecution. Aren't we all waiting for everything to get better too, for things to go our way for a change, when is the time? How much long O Lord will we suffer under COVID 19 restrictions? When will things go back to normal? When is the time? Jesus told the disciples..."It is not for you know the time, it is in God's time."

But it was now TIME for Jesus to leave. He told his friends they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The word witness in Greek is Μάρτυρας the ENGLISH word martyrs. Jesus said you will be my witnesses/martyrs/sacrifice your own lives so that Jesus will be known to the end of the earth. And then he ascends into heaven/he takes the invisible elevator straight up to heaven into the clouds. Jesus friends were gazing up toward heaven. Think about their bodily position. The disciples were gazing up into heaven, they were standing up, heads tilted back, look up beyond themselves. They were no longer navel gazing, they were no longer turned in on themselves, no longer in a fetal position. Jesus was sending them out beyond themselves to the world, when sudden two men in white spoke to them.....The two guys in white said, he'll come back...Jesus will come back...but again NO time was given...so the disciples went back to the upstairs room and were together with the women who followed Jesus and they prayed...looking up to heaven...waiting for the Holy Spirit to tell them what to do now.

Looking up into heaven...it is physically impossible to be curved in on ourselves can't be gazing at your navel and looking up into heaven...looking up into heaven calls us to look beyond ourselves...looking beyond our belly buttons...self-centered narcissistic tendencies. They are looking up and beyond their own needs, wants and desires to the greater mission that Jesus has set before them. A mission they will accomplish with the help of the Holy Spirit. In today's reading from John 17 we hear that as he prayed for his disciples, Jesus looked up to heaven. The disciples overhear his conversation with God. Jesus prays in effect, God you know, now's the time, the hour has come...you know all we've been through here...you know that we're in this for the long haul...we're in this together...and now it's time for me to leave them...so protect them...protect them...protect them from themselves and the original sin of humanity, turning in on themselves. Friends, think about it for a minute. Where do we spend most of our time looking? At the ground? At our navels? At ourselves? Martin Luther said, in his lectures on Romans, "Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, [being] so deeply curved in on itself [that what motives us is this sin that] wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.

Where do we spend most of our time looking? At the ground? At our feet? At ourselves? Our navels? Are we curved in on ourselves? Where are we looking? Here we are now, all thinking about how our lives have been impacted by COVID-19. Are we looking up to heaven and out for our neighbor? Or turned in curved in on ourselves? Next Sunday, we celebrate Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit is the breathe of life. The Holy Spirit is the wind of God's creative fire that warms us and opens us up. We uncurl. We are born anew through the waters of baptism and stretch out the fetal position. We are released from the navel gazing position. We look up to the heavens, and as we straighten we look up at the tree of life. We see the resurrected Jesus and experience his transforming love. We look up to the heavens and see beyond ourselves and see the hurts and needs of this world. We see our purpose in God's mission and we are able to go and be witnesses for Jesus to the ends of the earth, which may be, these days, the end of the block, the other end of an email, to Malawi, Africa or the food pantry cross town. You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Today, let the Holy Spirit turn you outward to look up to the heavens. What do you see beyond, beyond yourself? Today, look up to the heavens. Make an attempt to pray beyond your wants and needs and see the needs of your neighbors. This next week, take a prayer walk. Look up past the treetops, through the cross, to the heavens. Take a prayer walk around your neighborhood and pray for all the homes and business you pass. Pray for the people who live and work there. Pray that the Holy Spirit will show you how you can be a witness to Jesus' love to the ends of the earth. **AMEN**

Let us pray. We give thanks to you almighty God that your son Jesus humbled himself and came to live among. He humbled himself and gave his life for us. The corona virus has turned up inward on ourselves

to focus on only what we want. Forgive us. By the power of your Holy Spirit turns us from our self-centered ways and turn us outward to love you and to love our neighbor. In Jesus' name we pray, **AMEN**