

Many of you already know that I recently became a father. Our daughter is five weeks old now. And I promise I won't get up here and talk about her every sermon, but this morning I want to tell you something about her name. Her name is Lydia. And some of you have asked me where that name comes from.

First, Lydia is a biblical name – Lydia shows up in a short story in the book of Acts. But that story will have to wait for another sermon.

Because Lydia is also a family name. The first name of my great-grandmother, Lydia Mueller. Lydia Mueller was born on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1892. Both of her parents immigrated to America from Germany. Her dad, Ernst, was a German Lutheran pastor. He served a parish in Wood Lake, MN for seventeen years. This is where Lydia spent her childhood.

When she was in her eighties, great-grandmother Lydia told stories of her life to one of her grandchildren, and I'm so blessed to have this document, these stories. One of the earliest memories Lydia recalls is one of playing outside of her house when she is only four or five years old when suddenly, out of the woods, emerged two adult Native Americans who were in need of something to eat.

“I was so scared I could hardly move,” Lydia recalls, “but when I found my feet I ran to my mother in the kitchen yelling, ‘Mama, the Indians are coming to kill us.’”

Now keep in mind that not too long before this moment, a war had raged in Minnesota between the United States and several bands of Dakota Sioux Indians. When the war was over, many of the native peoples were imprisoned, executed, or forced off of their land. And folks in small, rural communities like Lydia's carried with them a deep fear of native people.

So when these two people came walking out of the woods towards Lydia, everything she had learned – everything she thought she knew – came flooding into her brain, and she fled home in fear of her life. Lydia tells the rest this way:

“My mother told me to hush, that they were just coming for a bite of food, and they didn't have the will or way to hurt anybody. She let them have a whole gooseberry pie and some fresh milk and they sat down on the porch steps and stuffed themselves so much the milk and gooseberry juice ran down their chins onto their tattered clothing. I wasn't afraid of Indians anymore after that.”

This is who I named my daughter after. A person who had the courage to unlearn some of the fear and hatred she had been taught. A woman whose faith drew her into a

meal with those whom she believed to be the enemy, and whose fear of them was washed away along with some milk and gooseberry pie.

This is the wisdom of God and the cross. Sometimes, faith in Christ calls us to unlearn what we think we know. Paul writes about this wisdom in his letter to the Corinthians:

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” Paul writes. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world...so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Cor. 1:27-29)

The wisdom of God, my friends, is foolishness to us, is it not? God chooses to go to the cross – to a place of shame and weakness and suffering – in order that we might know God's love for us. God's wisdom does not regard us according to who is right or who is strong or who is the best educated. No. The wisdom of God is found at the cross, in powerlessness – in the meek, the mourning, the lost, and the least.

For Lydia Mueller on that bright morning in 1897, God's wisdom was found in the gooseberry pie that was dripping down faces and melting away assumptions and animosity. It was found when she risked knowing the very people she had been taught to fear; when she broke bread with them.

Because the gospel of Jesus Christ, the foolishness of the cross, is not about our sense of rightness. It's about God's righteousness.

So who is righteous? Who is called blessed? Well, listen to the words of Jesus:

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are merciful. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. (Matthew 5:1-12)

When I read these words of Jesus again earlier this week, I had this feeling that I had heard them recently someplace else. And then I remembered. Those of you who, like me, watched the inauguration of our new president perhaps heard these beatitudes read out loud just before the oath of office was given.

Which, in one sense, is very appropriate; but in another sense, is very ironic.

Appropriate because we find Jesus saying these words as his first public appearance to the crowds who stand to listen to him, and to his followers who are wondering what he will be all about. This sermon on the mount is Jesus' inaugural address into his public ministry.

Ironic because – surprise, surprise - Jesus' inaugural address is not about strength or power or might. The inauguration of Jesus brings words of good news and blessing to the meek, the mourning, the poor in spirit, and to those who hunger for righteousness and justice.

In the eyes of those who wished Jesus would come to vanquish their enemies, these inaugural words were very foolish words indeed. In Jesus' inaugural address, blessings pour down for those we would least expect. God's righteousness is proclaimed to the meek, the mourning, the lost, and the least.

My friends, I hope you hear yourself included within this litany of blessings. Because you are. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus wants his disciples – and all of us who follow him – he wants us to know that we are indeed called blessed. That the promise of God's blessing and love will not run out.

Maybe you identify among the mourners today, as you find yourself in grief over a death or a loss or a significant life change. Well, Jesus says, "blessed are you."

Maybe you find yourself poor in spirit today, racked with fear and doubt, unsure of God's provision and promises for you. Well, Jesus says, "blessed are you."

Or maybe you identify among the merciful, as you seek to extend mercy and forgiveness to someone who needs it – someone who has treated you unfairly or hurt you badly. "Blessed are you."

But I hope that we might all hear a word of blessing as those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness." Because the righteousness of God – the blessing he bestows on each one of us – it calls us to hunger for the righteousness and blessing of all people. We are called to bless and to have compassion for all, and especially for the meek, the mourning, the lost and the least.

And, if the foolishness of God's blessing extends especially to the weak and the suffering, I can think of no one more in need of words of blessing today than those around the world who flee from war, persecution, hunger, and danger.

If, as Paul says, God's wisdom is revealed to us in weakness, we better begin paying attention to those who are most publicly maligned and despised these days. If we don't, our human "wisdom" that denies them may indeed be considered shameful in the eyes of God.

In fact, Lydia Mueller is not the only Lutheran to be transformed by the welcoming of strangers. You see, Lutherans happen to have a strong track record of hungering for the righteousness of refugees and immigrants in particular. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services has helped over 500,000 immigrants and refugees rebuild their lives in America across seventy-five years of service.

In a recent press release, Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services states: "As Christians, we do not fear our new neighbors who have fled for their very lives – we embrace them. As people of faith, we are called to love and serve our neighbors – and as a result, our churches, our communities and our nation are stronger."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://lirs.org/press-inquiries/press-room/condemns-the-trump-administrations-actions-against-refugees-and-migrants/>

We here know how true this statement is. Many of us, members of Christ the King, are recent refugees and immigrants! And we know how much stronger this diversity makes us as a body of Christ. Even as we sit here now, one of our members, Willie Johnson, who spent most of his life in a refugee camp in Ghana, has traveled back to Ghana in order to bring aid to refugees who remain in camps there, waiting to make it to a new and safe home.

To deny those who are the most vulnerable in our world: this runs completely against the inauguration words of Jesus. And caring for the immigrant and the refugee – regardless of their religion or culture – is not a political position, it is a biblical one.

Throughout scripture we hear commands like these: “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:34)

To deny the stranger and the outcast is to deny our history, our shared identity as a people who have all been strangers once, our identity as a people that God has brought through the wilderness over and over again.

And, even more than this, to deny the stranger and outcast is to deny the very wisdom of God that shows up at our doorsteps and borders in the weak and suffering ones of the world. It is to deny Jesus himself.

The blessings that we hear today are Jesus’ inauguration words at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel. So what are Jesus’ parting words, some of the last things he says to us before going to that foolish cross?

Matthew, chapter 25: The righteous ones ask him, “When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?” and Jesus replies, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me...and truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

So blessed are the peacemakers  
Blessed are the poor in spirit  
Blessed are the refugees fleeing violence and war,  
Blessed are the immigrants seeking opportunity and a better future  
Blessed are the Lydias throughout the ages who conquered their fear  
Blessed are the strangers who come seeking food  
And blessed are you, my brothers and sisters, who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

A righteousness that knows no border or hatred or fear. A righteousness that “does justice, loves kindness, and walks humbly with God.” (Micah 6:8)

And, should you still feel wary of the immigrant or stranger, I have bad news and good news. The bad news is that we do not have milk and gooseberry pie for everyone to eat and drink. But the good news is that we do have bread and wine, the very body and blood of the crucified one who came to live as a stranger among us. So come. Eat and

drink and let all of your fear melt away. For God is with us here, blessing us and calling us to be a refuge and a blessing for *all* people. AMEN