

I saw a quip the other day that went something like: “new pastors imagine they will change the world, only to find out they almost get fired for changing the bulletin.”

That might be a slightly cynical take, but we can all relate. We all got into this because we were thoroughly enchanted at some point with Jesus, and had a vision for what the church at its best could be. And then we quickly learned what we already knew: trading in sin and redemption can be heartbreaking, petty, exhausting, and also, occasionally, knock you right down holy.

Most of us had made a kind of peace with this dance, and then COVID came along and, like an angry toddler swatting at the mobile above his crib, rocked the whole equilibrium. The pandemic, and the new racial reckoning that came along with it, shut a lot of things down, blew a lot of stuck things wide open, scattered our flocks, and cast a lot of the cracks in our system into sharper and far less flattering light.

So now, walking into our first fully in-person Holy Week since 2019, we are like the family coming out of the storm cellar of their Minnesota farm house after the tornado has wrought its erratic, dystopian-style path through the town. Like Noah and company after the flood, or the prophets shepherding back from exile, we face a project of reconstruction, forming whatever will be out of the rubble of what has been.

We are given a blueprint for this rebuild in today’s gospel lesson. “A dispute also arose among them as to which would be regarded as the greatest.” This is one of the optional readings for a deacon ordination, and I’ve preached on this text plenty of times, but it wasn’t until this week that I realized this happens in the next breath after Jesus institutes the Eucharist. I mean, he has literally just finished the words of institution in the last verse, establishing this meal that is an

icon of self-giving love, a memorial of how he dies the scandalous death of a common criminal for us, and the first thing the disciples do is wonder who is going to get the best press out of it, the highest promotion, the most prestigious title. Jesus corrects them more patiently than they deserve: but not so with you. You, in this meal, are called to be an alternative society, one that is not based on the world's domination systems and petty pecking orders, but one that reflects my roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-down-on-your-knees love. That's the world you are being sent to build.

'But I am among you as one who serves.' That's the blueprint we are being sent with as we take stock of the post-COVID landscape. Over and over and over again, in every moment of reconstruction, the church has tended to stay stuck in some version of where the disciples were at the last supper. All of us who are disciples of Jesus, including and maybe even especially us clergy, have spent far too much time trying to hold on to what we have, or what we want, and the broken and hurting world around us has chosen to move on.

My best hope is that we will really take this blueprint to heart this time. And my God, beloved, what do we have to lose? Fifty years ago being a priest, a deacon, or a bishop tended to be high on prestige and low on stress. Today that has flipped completely. There's almost no social prestige and often an almost intolerable amount of stress. When we walk around dressed like this outside the church we are at best perceived with patronizing condescension as misguided fools, and at worst as agents of intolerance and bigotry. And inside the church, we are IMAX size screens of projection for everyone's hopes, anger, grief, and anxiety about the future. We can't do anything about that, so what if we all just shed the expectation that we're somehow going to fix or preserve what the church has been? What if we shed the sense that we even could do that,

and simply went out doing our best to look and act like Jesus, throwing aside our petty egos that this works is always going to shatter anyway, looking for how we can serve the next person in front of us, letting God sort it all out?

But I am among you as one who serves.

I don't get to be with all of you often enough, so I hope you'll tolerate me getting personal for a minute. As I approach the two-year mark as your bishop, one of the things that has been surprising to discover, and frankly hard to accept, is that I feel like I am out of tricks. I did not see that coming. I had a good track record in ministry. I had a lot of tricks I was looking forward to deploying to help us as we move forward. COVID stole a lot of those, and the ones that translated into a COVID world have mostly been spent. So the sobering fact for all of you is that, going forward, about the only thing you're going to get from the bishop is Craig, and believe me, I am deeply conscious of just how often that doesn't cut it.

But as I've wrestled with this in my own spiritual life lately, I've thought that maybe, if I can really step out from behind myself and give you *me*, and you can really step out from behind yourselves and give your people *you*, as painful and humiliating as that will occasionally be, we may just be able to realize Paul's vision of leadership: Jesus must increase, and I must decrease. If we are out of tricks, and all we have is ourselves, then maybe we can finally get out of Jesus' way. We may just be able to really join God in becoming architects of the new order of love.

Maybe for this rebuild, instead of rearranging the furniture, we can, as Bishop Scott Barker recently put it, drag it all out into the streets and give it away. Maybe for this meal, we can stop

worrying about how big our slice of pie is, and can learn just how full we can be by giving it all away.

In March of 2020, we thought we'd all be back in church for Easter. That's an Easter we are still waiting for. And maybe there's something of the Spirit in that.

Maybe, this year, we are finally ready to encounter the power of the risen Lord, because we have been stripped of our tricks, exposed, and we stand with empty hands before God's mighty power to save. Maybe this Easter we can finally, fully seek God's triumph instead of our own, and join all those precious souls God has entrusted to our care with the blueprint that can flip the world order: it is not so with you. But I am among you as one who serves.