

Waterloo Lutheran Seminary Youth Day

Keynote #1--Discovering Faith

(written and presented by Rev Joel Crouse—Eastern Synod Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries)

When I was a teenager, growing up in the parsonage in Welland, I shaved my head. Just as my dad would go to work each morning in his clerics – the same uniform I wear today – I had my own particular style: scuffed up Doc Martins, a spray-painted T-shirt, bleached jeans, and of course, that unnerving shaved head. I listened to music my parents didn't understand, and read books that probably alarmed them. I imagine there were a few late night conversations about Joel and what might be going on, but they wisely kept pretty quiet about it, biding their time. I am sure more than a few people reassured them: Don't worry, he is just "finding himself." And of course, eventually, I grew my hair back, and, after a few other incarnations, went off to seminary.

But I wouldn't define those years as "finding myself." I don't think that term makes a lot of sense, or that we do justice to our teenagers when we use it. I wasn't lost – in that moment with my shaved head and my punker music, I knew exactly who I was. It would be more accurate to say that I was "building myself." Every step we take, every phase we go through, builds upon the last one, shaping us into people – one layer of brick, cemented upon another, from cradle to grave.

And that's another problem with the phrase "finding yourself," – it suggests that at some point you make the grand discovery and that's it, you have solved the magical equation of you. But life keeps changing, and that life keeps changing us – we don't stop building, or searching. And that might be a bit daunting sometimes, but it's not boring.

This is how faith works. We often use the same phrase: "finding faith" or "discovering faith." But that's inaccurate, or at least incomplete. Better to describe faith as a journey, rather than an ending. Martin Luther King, Jr said: *Faith is taking the first step even when you can't see the whole staircase.*

If we invest our energy only in the ending, we have missed the real definition of faith: Faith is our relationship to God. It differs for every person. And it differs for every person at every stage in their lives. Faith when you are kid in Sunday School means "Jesus Loves Me." Faith, when you are teenager in high school, might mean: Who is God to me anyway? Faith, when you are grandmother, might mean: Look at the family with which I have been blessed.

We are fascinated with that soul-searching journey. And why not? We are all on the same one, in one way or another. The journey of faith is written into nearly every pop culture blockbuster that draws crowds at the movie theatre. Tony Stark, aka Iron Man, starts out as a selfish billionaire. He loses everything he thought was important, and discovers that he has a purpose, that he is able to be a different person, a better person, a hero. He sounds a lot like Job, who had everything he thought he needed, and when it was stripped away from him, chose not to give up, but to adapt.

And sure, Job implicitly leans on his faith in God. God never gets named in Iron Man, the movie. But in the midst of his darkest hour, Tony Stark is guided by a doctor, who urges him to reconsider life, sacrifices himself for Tony, and believes he will be joining his family in an afterlife – that is faith. Faith in ourselves looks a lot like faith in God. And often we move head in building that faith by the lessons we learn from others, even when they don't happen in church, or aren't read in the Bible.

This is another reason why it is wrong to think of Faith as something we must discover like a professor looking for empirical, testable, demonstrable protocol. It implies that there is a set, single method, a

step-by-step equation to getting there. That's just not true. Going to church helps us learn about faith as a shared community. But that faith hides out in many, many other places besides church.

We spend too much time, worrying about getting our faith stories right. Other people tell us what faith looks like: we dictate to ourselves what faith should look like. For some of us, faith might mean reading the Bible every day, and diligently praying every morning. But I suspect that for many of us, faith is a little more meandering – perhaps it comes down to trying to live good lives, learning to trust that things will work out, and reconnecting with God when we need to. If we can do those things, we are doing pretty well.

And still, we worry when our relationship with God falters. We feel guilty when church feels like an obligation. We beat ourselves up for only remembering God when times are rough. But think about any relationship you have: sometimes it gets your attention, sometimes you just feel really frustrated with the person, and sometimes, maybe, you feel indifferent about the whole thing. God has room for all those emotions. God waits when our faith wanes. And every time we return with more questions, we travel deeper into our faith, we add texture to our conversations with God. As long as we keep coming back with questions, we are doing our part in the relationship. And those steps, that journey, is ours alone to take.

The fact is, there is always going to be one more step. Sure, Tony Stark became Iron man, and changed his ways, and set about saving the world instead of blowing it up. But there's already plans for a sequel, because now there is a whole host of new problems, and new explosions to deal with.

Part of faith is knowing that our relationship with God, and our belief in ourselves, is strong enough to carry us through.

This Christmas, I got a fridge magnet, the kind pastors always seem to get. "I found Jesus," it says. "He was under the Sofa the whole time." A joke of course. But the more I thought it about, the more I think it makes an interesting theological point. Because, when we talk about "finding Jesus", we are getting it backwards: Jesus doesn't need finding – Jesus is with us all the time. Jesus is wherever we are in need: standing with us, beside us, carrying us. Jesus doesn't get lost. Jesus doesn't leave. And so we never have to set out and find Jesus: we just have learn how to adjust our sensory perception to know that Jesus is here.

So even our stumbling, faltering steps in lives of faith don't need to scare us, or discourage us. We never travel on our own. Faith is not a journey to find Jesus; it is a journey to build a better relationship with Jesus.

There is not one single person in this room that has faith all figured out. But every one of us is welcomed into a relationship with a God who loves us into wholeness no matter who we are or where we have been. Faith is a journey that asks us to be true to ourselves—true to the person that God wants us to be. Amen.

(Note: please feel free to use this sermon if it is meant to build up the Church of Christ and Youth and Young Adult Ministry within your context)