



WATERLIFE JOURNAL

The News Magazine of the Western Iowa Synod ELCA

SAINTS AND STORYTELLERS

REFORMATION AND ALL SAINTS CELEBRATIONS
LISTENING TO THE "NONES AND DONES"
TELLING YOUR CONGREGATION'S STORY

WISYNOD.ORG

OCTOBER 2026

from Bishop Scott Dalen

Jesus is REALLY good at using parables. Throughout the gospels we find countless examples of JC telling a story to illuminate some point or aspect of the kingdom of God. He shares 8 of them in Matthew chapter 13 alone.

Admittedly, as someone who's been preaching in various capacities for almost 20 years now, there was a time when I found myself cringing every time I looked ahead at the lectionary text for the next Sunday and found a parable waiting for me. I really struggled with it. Probably because I had this idea that, as the preacher, it was my job to find a nugget of truth in the text and spend somewhere between 10-20 minutes talking about to hopefully make THAT point clear to the congregation.

But there was my tripping point...Jesus already told the story to make the point. THE PARABLE IS THE POINT RIGHT!?!?!? So, if Jesus already made the point, why am I up in front trying to do the same thing again? That, my friends, was the struggle for a long time.

Now if I may, I'm going to side step into a story. Go figure.

For a number of years in my previous call in Underwood, I had weekly breakfast with one of the members. We first kicked it off when the individual was council president, but we both enjoyed the ongoing conversation so much that we kept doing it for 7 or 8 years. Over that time, we got pretty close. And at some point, I shared with him that afore-mentioned struggle with preaching about a parable. Actually, I probably shared it with him just about every summer...because there's a common stretch through the summer months when the lectionary feeds us up a bunch of parables.

*“Jesus told the
crowds all these
things in parables;
without a parable he
told them nothing.
This was to fulfill
what had been
spoken through the
prophet: ‘I will open
my mouth to speak
in parables; I will
proclaim what has
been hidden since
the foundation.’”
(Matthew 13:34-35)*



BISHOP SCOTT



It's also worth mentioning that by this time in my ministry I had shifted away from scripting my sermons into preaching extemporaneously (or "off the cuff" as I tend to call it). And it's ALSO worth mentioning that my sermons will almost always start off with a story of something that happened that week or talking about a pop-culture reference that seems applicable in my head.

In one of these instances that I was lamenting having to preach another parable, he looked me straight in the eye and said "Pastor, you are a story teller, it's literally what you do. You do the same thing that Jesus does. Why is that a problem?"

He wasn't wrong. I am, by nature, a story teller. It something that I inherited through the Dalen family tree. You get my siblings and I together in the same room and it is 100% guaranteed that we're going to start telling stories...and we'll get louder and louder until one of us is laughing so hard we fall out of our chairs. My wife and kids often comment on this phenomenon...and they can list off the 3 or 4 stories that inevitably come up.

All of this stuff together...it actually makes sense. Stories, especially shared stories, speak into our common experience. And that's what Jesus is doing when he shares a story that highlights a common idea or experience that his audience would be able to relate to. He does it because that relatability works in a unique way to reveal some unobtainable truth about God or faith or heaven or the age to come.

These things that we can't really comprehend...Jesus tells us "Well...it's like this..." (And he's probably cracking a grin as he kicks off the story).

This is why stories are important, when they serve as tangible examples of what God is up to in the world. They might be made up, or they might be real. They may have just happened a moment ago, or they might have been a memorable exchange between brothers that happened 40 years ago. They are all part of our shared experience...which we might call the human experience.

And if I might share one more thought, this all points me towards the scriptures. I've long considered the Bible as a whole to be an honest look at what it means to be human in this good but not perfect world, AND also revealing truths about where we find God in the midst of all that. So, when we hear a good story, or tell one ourselves...maybe, just maybe, someone else hears something familiar, which draws them into a moment of community and relationship...and in the end, isn't that what God seems to be inviting us all into?

In Christ,
Bishop Scott



I Love to Tell the Story

Many of us love this beautiful, old hymn and the way it makes us feel. We sing it proudly and loudly, mostly because we know it so well, but also because we believe strongly in the poetic words put to music. There is something powerful in boldly proclaiming “I love to tell the story.”

But why do we tell stories? What is so important about sharing with others these things that are so sacred and important to us? From a very young age, we hear stories being told in all sorts of ways. We read books, we listen to our parents and grandparents share tales of their lives, and we even put notes to words and sing our stories strong. Stories connect us, they help us remember who we are, where we come from and where we are going. Most importantly, stories are how we share what matters most to us.

As this song conveys to us all, the ultimate story we tell is God’s story. It is a story of grace and mercy, of forgiveness and healing. It is the story of Jesus Christ entering into our broken and chaotic world, proclaiming God’s kingdom come, and welcoming the stranger. It is the story of each and every one of us. It is our story too.

The amazing thing about our stories is that they don’t end with things that have happened in the past. God is continuing to write our chapters, and our stories continue well beyond our lives here on earth. That’s why it is so important that we pay attention to the stories we are telling.

I grew up in a small town, where everyone knew everyone else’s stories. Or at least we thought we did. The truth is, people on the outside don’t know every detail, everything we believe, everything we feel. This is true in our churches as well. Those that aren’t members in our congregations may not fully know everything that being a Lutheran means, or have a deep understanding of Lutheran theology. They may even never walk through the doors of our church buildings. But we are all looking for connection, a place to belong, and we are all longing to share stories.

*I love to tell the story!
'Twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and His love.*



**DIRECTOR FOR
EVANGELICAL
MISSION
REVEREND
MELISSA PICKERING**



Many of our congregations use social media to share their stories with those that are members, and those that aren't. We use many platforms to provide information regarding worship times, to advertise events, and to market our churches. But oftentimes these are announcements, not a way of sharing our stories. An announcement says "our food pantry needs volunteers on Tuesday afternoon." A story says, "every Tuesday afternoon our neighborhood gathers together to hear the stories of those that walk through our doors. Last week, Mae, a single mom of three, shared with volunteers that our food pantry has been a blessing to her and her children during a very difficult month. This is what loving our neighbor looks like. We invite you to be a part of these stories."

Sharing our stories on social media platforms invites us to hold together the old and the new. The story of old- the way Jesus loves and serves, the way the Holy Spirit moves in and through us, and the way grace meets us as we are, and the new-through posts, photos and quick videos of the ways we are sharing our tables, serving the Kingdom of God, and passing the faith onto the next generation, gives our stories a human face.

As congregations we are called to share the Good News and make faith visible to all. When we use social media to share our stories instead of promoting our events, we are being faithful to our ministries and our proclamation. We are saying to the world "God is at work here, and we want to invite others into our story." We are sharing what matters most to us with those inside and outside of our buildings. We love to tell our stories because they have changed us, continue to change us and because someone beyond our walls may be longing to hear them.

Church storytelling is essential to our congregations. There are many ways we can learn to be better storytellers. The ELCA has provided a [guide](#) to social media and storytelling: When, as neighbors, we work together across denominational lines, we become witness to a powerful testimony that the Gospel calls us to love before it divides us by labels. Our unity becomes a living witness to Christ's reconciling work, and a promise of hope for the world we live in.

As our landscapes continue to change like the seasons, and as we, the priesthood of all believers, move forward in love and service to others and to God, we must adapt the way we do ministry- both in big cities, small towns and on our rolling plains. Partnering with mutli-faith communities offers us a hopeful path forward. It doesn't mean giving up our own identities as congregations, but rather an invitation into the mission of God. And we all know that we are better when we are church together.



The Western Iowa Synod has long valued collaboration as an expression of our life together in Christ. Through these partnerships, rural congregations are finding new ways to be grounded in hope, to deepen relationships, and serve their communities with creativity and joy. This work is about shared abundance, rather than scarcity, and in that we celebrate. Churches, rooted in Christ and their commitment to one another, thrive together for the sake of the Gospel.

May God continue to bless our congregations as they build bridges of opportunities, extend Christ's welcome to all, and bear faithful witness across Iowa's rural landscapes. . The St. Paul Area Synod has provided a video for equipping storytellers with tools to share a church's story: When, as neighbors, we work together across denominational lines, we become witness to a powerful testimony that the Gospel calls us to love before it divides us by labels. Our unity becomes a living witness to Christ's reconciling work, and a promise of hope for the world we live in.

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There are many other resources that are available to share with your congregations for how to better learn, share and live into the stories of your church. Your stories matter because God's story matters.





REFORMATION & ALL SAINTS CELEBRATIONS



In a few weeks, our sanctuaries will be immersed in tradition. On the 25th, red will appear on the altar and worshippers alike. The following week, white will adorn the church. We will sing “A Mighty Fortress” and “For All the Saints.” These Sundays have been a shared heartbeat. We have known their rhythm by heart. Now, however, that feeling of certainty is fading; the feeling is somehow different.

For many of us, these days have been part of the fabric of life. We may not need to open a hymnal. And we’ve remembered the names day after day before they’re read in worship. For others, this is all new. They may have come from another tradition, and are still searching for their place in your midst. Reformation Sunday can feel like stepping into a family reunion where you don’t know the stories. All Saints can be even more daunting, especially if your grief feels out of place.

Of course, we want to explain it all. While a bulletin note or a longer sermon may feel like the right approach, it seldom bridges the gap. They leave worshippers as observers. What matters is giving everyone a way to participate. More than words, they are drawn into community by a shared action.

Here are two.

What if Reformation Sunday became a story we are all still writing? Avoid another sermon about 1517. Ask a few people, some who are long-time members and some who have just arrived, to share a time when their own faith shifted. It could be called “Our Reformation. Luther’s story is one narrative among many. Our stories are still unfolding. This sharing can happen during the sermon time or with guided prompts during coffee. The proclaims that this day belongs to all of us, not just to history.

Let’s make All Saints a day we can feel, not just hear. The litany is a treasure, so definitely keep it. But prior to worship, set out a table with paper leaves or hand-sized stones, something ordinary for writing names. Invite everyone to add a name to a tree or cairn at the front whenever the moment feels right. This may even be in the middle of the worship service. Assure people that anyone who shaped your faith belongs here, even if they never entered a Lutheran congregation. No one needs to explain why their saint matters. At the end of worship, make sure to walk by and see all those names gathered together. That is what God’s family looks like.

There is no need for new theology for these ideas. No rewritten liturgy. Just a congregation to trust that its treasured practices can welcome new people without breaking. That is most certainly true. Tradition was never meant to be locked away. It is a living conversation the church has carried for five centuries. It continues now. It embraces everyone who walks through the door.



Getting to Know Reverend Cara LQ Knutson The Western Iowa Synod Staff

Blessed to be a blessing...

While we serve together as a unified staff, this month we continue to share the gifts of dedicated people who have joined the staff since September 2025.

Ask Rev. Cara Knutson how she ended up on Western Iowa Synod staff, and she'll answer with a smile: "God and the bishop." It started, half-jokingly, with a promise — she and Bishop Scott Dalen had said that if he were elected, she'd want to work alongside him. What began as a joke became a season of discernment together, and when Bishop Dalen was ready to build his staff, Cara applied. She remembers the exact moment she knew it was right: a conversation with Bishop Dalen where the two of them got animated and excited about what might be possible for the synod. "At that moment," she says, "I knew this was where God was calling me."

That same energy for partnership shapes how Cara talks about the parts of her ministry that rarely make it into a bulletin or annual report. She's quick to point to the synod's SAMs — Synodically Authorized Ministers — as some of the most vital, least visible leadership in our congregations. "They're called to a unique ministry," Cara says, "and their role as a lay person gives them a way of relating to the people in the pews that no one else has."

Ministry, of course, is rarely a solo endeavor, and Cara names Pr. Chip Borgstadt as a colleague who has shaped how she does this work — someone with "a beautiful spiritual gift of encouragement, empowerment, and advocacy." Their conversations have ranged from listening for the Holy Spirit to the more down-to-earth business of car maintenance — a topic that turns out to carry real theological weight. Cara points to the Rule of St. Benedict, which teaches that the tools of our work are as sacred as the vessels on the altar. Since synod ministry means a lot of time on the road, her car is often the first impression a congregation gets of her. "Yes, it's covered in stickers," she laughs, "but it's also clean and tidy. Most of the time."

To stay grounded for that work, Cara has recently taken up a set of new spiritual practices: praying the liturgy of the hours, centering prayer, and Soul Collage. Together, she says, they offer "much needed silence, space, grounding, and an outlet for my creativity that also feeds my spirit."

One visit has stayed with her in a particular way. A small rural congregation asked her directly: did they need to have an ordained pastor? As Cara helped them see that full-time rostered ministry wasn't a viable path for them, she braced for disappointment — but found something else instead. The congregation responded with openness, discerning together whether God might be calling someone from among themselves to lead their community of faith. "It made me so happy to see the Spirit at work," she says, "smiles in eyes and on faces, and a buzz of excitement in the air." Leadership and worship with one another, not out of competition or scarcity, but out of a shared recognition that we are all the body of Christ. "We can do more together than we can do alone," Cara says. "It's the most natural thing to come together to do the work of the kingdom of God."



If people in the pews know "synod staff" only as a title, Cara wants them to understand it as a ministry of presence and relationship — showing up, walking alongside congregations through transition, being a resource, building trust in person over time. "When we know one another, even a little, we care for each other," she says, "and we want people to be equipped to do the work and ministry the Spirit has uniquely called them to do." She turns to St. Teresa of Ávila for the words that capture it best: "Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours... yours are the hands with which he blesses the world." Cara adds, with a grin, "Who ever knew Teresa of Ávila was a Lutheran!" It's Christ's work, she says — our hands.

That conviction feeds directly into what gives Cara hope for the Western Iowa Synod right now. "We're a practical, pragmatic people," she says, "and I think God uses that to help us be open to doing something new." She points to Isaiah 43:19 — "For behold, I am doing a new thing; can you not perceive it?" — as one of her favorite passages, and she sees that new thing already taking shape: synod staff and congregations collaborating, congregations sharing resources and



**ASSISTANT TO THE
BISHOP FOR MOBILITY,
CALL PROCESS &
CONGREGATIONAL CARE
REV. CARA LQ KNUTSON**

WESTERN IOWA SYNOD STAFF

Reverend Scott Dalen, *Bishop*

Reverend Cara LQ Knutson, *Assistant to the Bishop for Mobility,
Call Process, and Congregational Care*

Reverend Chip Borgstadt, *Assistant to the Bishop for Candidacy*

Reverend Melissa Pickering, *Director for Evangelical Mission*

Julie Cook, *Office Administrator*

Rebekah Elder, *Synod Events Coordinator*

Dominique Fritz-Rapsch, *Synod Bookkeeper*



Faith Community Nursing Ministries

Dear Friends in the Western Iowa Synod

Why Should the Church Concern Itself with Health?

I was recently at an ELCA meeting and stopped at the Augsburg Fortress vendor display to see what might be featured and of interest. There I happened upon a small book entitled Reengaging ELCA Social Teaching on Health and Health Care. As a nurse, this captured my attention. I did not know there was an ELCA statement on Health and Health Care.

The statement Caring for Our Health: Our Shared Endeavor was developed and subsequently approved by the Churchwide Assembly in 2003. It calls upon the church to “renew their prayer for the health and healing of all people, to strengthen their congregations as communities of healing, to study the scriptural witness to the God of healing, and to participate in the shared endeavor of healthcare in their daily lives”.¹ This call is still relevant today. In addition to this formal statement from the ELCA, there are ample scripture references that remind us of our call to care for our own health and that of others. Here are a few examples that come to mind.

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.” – 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. – 1 Thessalonians 5:23
“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” – 1 Peter 5:7

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” – Philippians 4:6-7

And the following verses remind us of the value of having a community surround us always, but especially in times of loss and grief, anxiety, illness, and spiritual pain.

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.” – Galatians 6:2

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:11



Carol DeSchepper, RN,
Faith Community Nurse and
Spiritual Director
First Lutheran Church,
Milford, IA



Faith Community Nursing Ministries

“Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.” – James 5:14-15

Our church families and circle of close friends encourage us, pray with and for us, and can be a source of hope, inspiration, and/or often may simply be a quiet presence when it's need most. Can we be this kind of presence for one another; for people with cancer and other physical diseases, those with mental illness and addiction, those in spiritual crisis, and those who struggle emotionally with day-to-day challenges? Can we listen, really listen, to one another's pain?

A healing church is present to remind one another of the tenderness of Christ in all of our ailing places and in our wellness. Let's assure one another that the Gospel meets us in our pain and speaks hope, renewal and peace. Let's take intentional steps to be healthy congregations.

I remind you of the question posed in my earlier article “how are you and your congregation supporting the health of your members?”

Carol DeSchepper, RN, Faith Community Nurse and Spiritual Director First Lutheran Church, Milford, IA

1“Caring for Our Health: Our Shared Endeavor,” ELCA, 2003.





Listening to the Nones and Dones

(It's not tacked to the church door yet. Just give it time.)

Five hundred years ago, a monk with a hammer and a heavy heart changed the structure of Western Christianity. Martin Luther wasn't trying to start a movement. He just wanted to speak the truth where it could be heard. He nailed his words to the church door because he believed God's people deserved to be listened to.

They say, "History doesn't repeat itself. But it rhymes."

Today the hammer is in someone else's hand. Some folks have never belonged to a church and don't feel like they're missing a thing. Others were once part of the church and left, and they don't owe anyone an explanation for it. These are people you know. Maybe they're at your own kitchen table. Whether they say it out loud or just say it with their absence on a Sunday morning, the message is the same: you stopped listening to us.

When somebody says that, it's easy to want to defend our door: we're prone to explain the theology. We want to correct the record. We're trying to hand them a pamphlet. I've felt that urge plenty of times myself, usually right before I said something I regretted. But ignoring the emerging ideas on the door didn't work in 1517, and I don't expect it'll work any better now.

We can begin by asking about the journey instead of the destination. "What happened that got you here?" opens something that "What do you believe?" never will. The first question invites a story. The second invites a debate, and nobody ever built trust arguing theology at the kitchen table. Most people who've left the church aren't carrying an argument. They're carrying an experience — a funeral that was handled badly, a question that got brushed off, a door that turned out to be locked the one time they needed it open. Ask about that. Then be ready to actually hear the answer, even the parts that are uncomfortable for you to hear.



"That sounds like it cost you something" will do more work in that moment than any explanation you could offer, and it costs you nothing but your need to be right.

In Luke 24:13-35, two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem, away from everything that just fell apart, and a stranger falls in step beside them. He doesn't open with doctrine. He asks, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" And Luke says they stood still, faces downcast, and just... told him. The whole disappointment. "We had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." That's not a statement of belief, that's grief talking.

Jesus lets them finish. He doesn't interrupt to correct their theology, even though he's the one person on that road who actually knows what happened. Only after they've told their story does he say anything at all, and even then he starts with scripture, not correction. The recognition doesn't come until the table — until the meal, until the breaking of bread, long after the listening.

Let the hard words land where they're aimed, and no further. Somebody might say something sharp about pastors, or about God, or about people who look a lot like you. It's tempting to take that personally and put up your guard. Don't, if you can help it. That sharpness almost always comes from a wound, not a verdict on your character. "That sounds like it cost you something" does more good in that moment than any explanation ever could, and it costs you nothing but your need to be right.

And here's the harder one. Don't even try to find the bridge back. Most of us listen with one ear cocked for the opening — the moment to invite, to close the loop, to steer things toward an answer we've already got loaded. Real listening means being willing to let the story end without fixing anything. Real listening is the best invitation extended. No correction needs to be offered, no countering with our perspective. Just their story, left standing as theirs. Strange as it sounds, the conversations that ask nothing in return are usually the ones that open a door further down the road — one we didn't build and don't get to take credit for.

Luther's protest mattered because he was willing to say a true thing and trust God with what came after. Maybe our calling now runs the other direction. Not speaking the truth at the door, but standing at it, willing to hear one.





Sept. 28 SAMS Text Study

OCTOBER 2026

Oct. 3 St. John/Sioux City 150th Celebration

Oct. 16 Candidacy Committee

Oct. 17 Wedding Practicum, Storm Lake Office, 9:00 a.m.

Oct. 18-19 Fall Convo

Oct. 24 Synod Council, Augustana, Manson, 10 a.m.

Oct. 26 SAMS Text Study

Oct. 29 First Call-Topic Politics & Lutheranism, via Zoom 11:30 a.m.

Nov. 5 Boundary Education, 4 sites

Nov. 26-27 Thanksgiving, Synod office closed

Nov. 30 SAMS Text Study

Dec. 11 Candidacy Committee

2027

Jan 16 Synod Council, via Zoom, 7:00 p.m.

Jan 25 SAM text study, 7 pm, via Zoom

Jan 28 First Call-Topic Planning, via Zoom, 11:30 a.m.



APRIL 16-17 SYNOD ASSEMBLY

*Synod staff meets Wednesday mornings & are not available
for calls. Please leave a message.*

Congregations in Transition

Congregations/Parishes being served by **SAMS:**

Primghar
Manson (Augustana)
Boxholm/Harcourt
Albert City
Pocahontas
Hawarden
Merrill, St. John
Pomeroy
Newell, Nain
Albert City, St. John
Alta/Immanuel
Linn Grove/Our Saviors
Rembrandt

Congregations/Parishes being served by a **student:**

Odebolt
Kiron
Christ and St. Peter, Rural LeMars
Holstein
Armstrong/Ringsted
Vincent
Moorhead
Dayton
Mineola
Sioux Rapids
Soldier
Onawa

Congregations/Parishes being served by an **interim:**

Stanton



Emmanuel, Shenandoah

Congregations in conversation with neighbors:

Exira
Shenandoah/Northboro

Congregations in Transition:

Congregations in Call Process:

Gowrie
Rock Valley
Akron
Underwood





Western Iowa Synod Prayers for September

For the Harvest

Gracious God, as the harvest continues, we thank you for your steady provision. Bless the hands that plant and gather, the land that yields its fruit, and the labor that brings food to our tables. Continue your blessing through the fullness of this season. Amen.

For Modern Reformers

God of every age, we give you thanks for the reformers among us still — those who question, challenge, and renew your church with courage. For their hope-bringing witness, we are grateful. Give us open hearts to hear what your Spirit is doing through them. Amen.



For Listening Without Judgment

Lord, open our ears before you open our mouths. Give us the humility to receive one another's stories without judgment, and the patience to let another's truth be spoken in full. Teach us to listen as you listen — with love. Amen.

For the Changing Weather

Creator God, as the seasons turn and the weather shifts beneath your sky, grant us wisdom to prepare — for body, home, and spirit alike. Keep us mindful of neighbors who feel the cold more sharply than we do. Guide our hands toward readiness and our hearts toward care. Amen.

Save the Date!

REGION 5
COLLABORATIVE

Boundaries Education

Thursday, November 5

St. Paul, Treynor
St. Mark, Sioux City
St. Olaf, Fort Dodge
Grace, Spirit Lake

Registration for Rostered
Leaders and SAMs by
October 19th.



***The Supply Worship Leader List
has been updated.***

Congregations should use this list to
identify a pastor or SAM who is
authorized to lead worship.



**The bishop and synod staff
will **NEVER** request money or
gift cards through email.
Do not respond to these
phishing emails.**





First Call **RETREATS**

In partnership with the Nebraska Synod, three retreats will be offered in 2027. These are optional, but beneficial.

January 10-12, Stewardship, Carol Joy Holling Retreat Center

April 18-20, TBA, Carol Joy Holling Retreat Center

August 1-3, TBA, Benedict Retreat Center, Schuyler

Water Is Life: Saints, Stories, and Our Companions in Tanzania

“Water is Life.”

Those three words have taken on new meaning for me after recent travels — a brief visit to Peru, and, more importantly, the ongoing companionship we share with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Southern Tanzania.

In Peru, I had the chance to walk among the remains of the Inca civilization, high in the Andes, where springs, rivers and irrigation channels determined where people could live and farm at all. Standing among those ancient stones, I found myself thinking about the things all human beings have in common, no matter where or when we live. We need water. We need food. We need one another. We search for meaning. And we tell stories.

That thought followed me home, and it followed me back to Tanzania, where I have traveled and walked alongside our companions for years. There, access to clean water is not simply an environmental concern or a development project. It is health. It is dignity. It is time. It is education, because children who do not have to spend hours each day searching for water have more opportunity to attend school. It is a future for a community.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania carries out water and development projects as part of its ministry, understanding Christian mission as both proclamation of the Gospel and service to the whole person. That is a lesson our companion synod relationship keeps teaching us: mission is not something we do for someone else. It is something we do with one another.

What Is a Saint?

As Lutherans, we sometimes hear the word "saint" and imagine someone from a distant time — a figure with a halo in a stained-glass window. But the Lutheran understanding of saints is much closer to home.

Saints are God's people. They are ordinary human beings who live by God's grace — people who sometimes get things wonderfully right and sometimes get things very wrong, who laugh and cry, doubt and believe, serve and stumble. The ELCA speaks of the communion of saints as the people of God joined together across time and place, "knit" together in the mystical body of Christ. A saint is not someone who has escaped being human. A saint is someone whose life helps us see God's grace.

One of my favorite saint stories is that of Martin of Tours, commemorated on November 11. As a young soldier, Martin encountered a poor man, cold and without adequate clothing, and cut his own cloak in two to share it. Later, Martin dreamed that Christ himself had been wearing the piece he gave away. Whether every detail can be historically verified isn't really the point. The story asks a question: What if the person standing in front of us is an opportunity to encounter Christ?

That question feels very different after years of walking alongside our companions in Southern Tanzania — a community shaped by different histories, different languages, and a very different relationship to water than most of us know in Western Iowa.

A Companionship, Not a Project

Our synod's relationship with Southern Tanzania has never been about one side giving and the other receiving. It has been a walking-together — a mutual sharing of joys, needs, prayers and stories. When our companions speak about water, they are not asking us for pity. They are inviting us into a shared understanding of what it means to depend on God and on one another for the most basic gift of life.

I have seen this played out in small, ordinary ways: a well dug, a relationship built over years of visits in both directions, a prayer offered across an ocean for a specific person by name. These things may never make it into a history book. But perhaps this is exactly what sainthood looks like — quiet, faithful, ongoing companionship.

The history of Christianity in places like the Andes reminds us to be humble about how the Gospel travels between cultures. There were moments of genuine Christian witness in the Americas, but also colonial power and coercion. Indigenous communities did not simply disappear into European Christianity; they interpreted, adapted and reshaped it in their own context. That history makes me grateful for the different shape our companionship with Tanzania has taken — one built, at its best, on mutuality rather than conquest.

We sometimes talk as though the Christian story belongs to us. It doesn't. It belongs to God. And God's people are found in Tanzania and in Iowa, among people whose ancestors knew the Gospel centuries before ours did and among congregations still learning what it means to be sent.

Water, Baptism, and Being Sent

In the church, water is the sign through which we are welcomed into the family of God. In Baptism, water becomes a visible reminder of God's promise. We don't earn God's grace. We don't manufacture it. We receive it — and then we are sent.

The ELCA describes Baptism and Holy Communion as means of grace, and worship gathers us around God's Word, water, bread and prayer before sending us back into the world. We come to the font. We come to the table. We hear the Word. And then we walk back out the door — into our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our congregations, and into companionship with Southern Tanzania, where people are thirsty not only for clean water but for justice, dignity, compassion, peace and hope.



Looking Around, Not Just Back

The saints remind us that faith is not simply something we believe on Sunday. It is something we live. Martin of Tours reminds us to see the person in need standing in front of us. The saints of every generation remind us that God works through ordinary people — and the companions I have come to know in Tanzania remind me that our world is both remarkably different and remarkably connected.

A village in Southern Tanzania. A Lutheran congregation here in Western Iowa. Different languages, different histories, different cultures — and yet the same God, the same human need for water and community, the same Christ who calls us to love our neighbor. So when we remember the saints, perhaps we should not only look backward. We should look around. Who is quietly serving? Who is working for clean water? Who is crossing an ocean, again and again, to meet a companion with faith and love? Perhaps these are the stories we need to tell, because the saints are not people who point to themselves. They point us toward God.

WATER IS LIFE. MAJI NI MAISHA.

Thanks be to God.



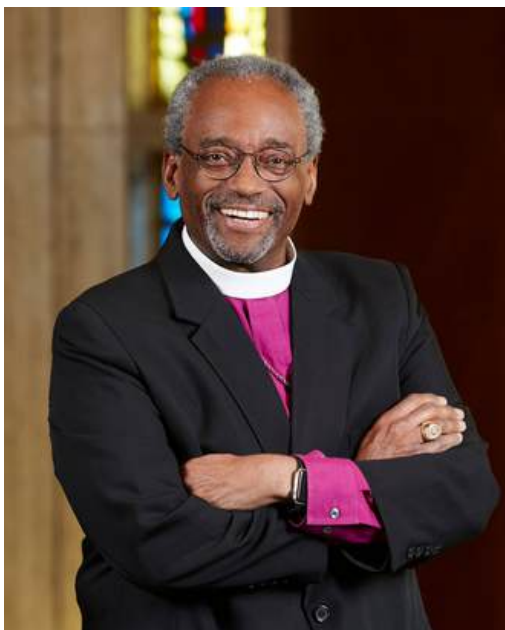
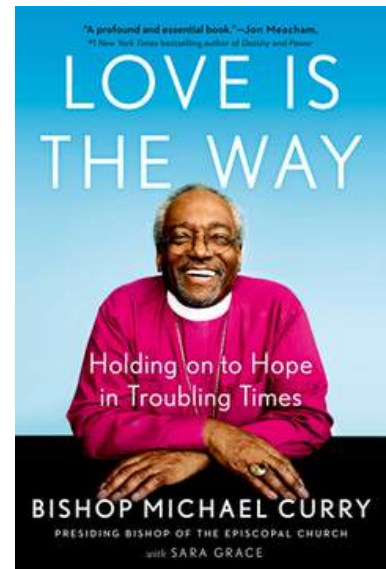
Book Reviews

Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubled Times by Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry

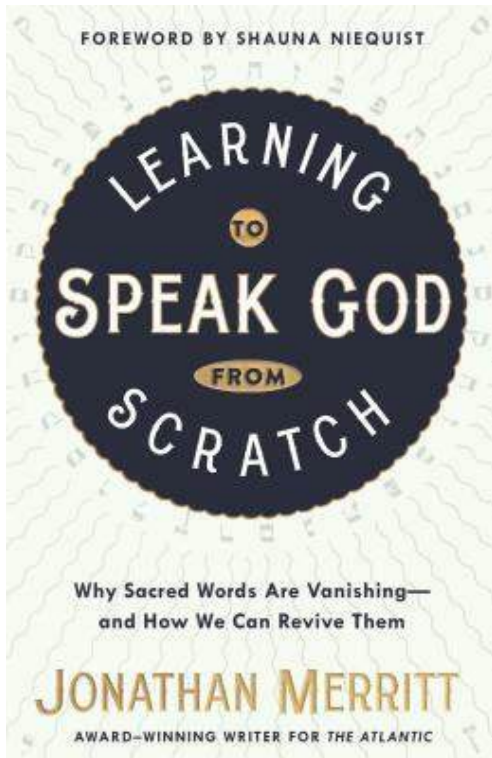
From Audible.com ...

As the descendant of slaves and the son of a civil rights activist, Bishop Michael Curry's life illustrates massive changes in our times. Much of the world met Bishop Curry when he delivered his sermon on the redemptive power of love at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle at Windsor Castle. Here, he expands on his message of hope in an inspirational road map for living the way of love, illuminated with moving lessons from his own life. Through the prism of his faith, ancestry, and personal journey, *Love Is the Way* shows us how America came this far and, more important, how to go a whole lot further.

The way of love is essential for addressing the seemingly insurmountable challenges facing the world today: poverty, racism, selfishness, deep ideological divisions, competing claims to speak for God. This book will lead readers to discover the gifts they need in order to live the way of love: deep reservoirs of hope and resilience, simple wisdom, the discipline of nonviolence, and unshakable regard for human dignity.



The Right Reverend Michael B. Curry—widely recognized as one of the most dynamic preachers of this era—served as the twenty-seventh presiding bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church. As chief pastor, spokesperson, president, and chief executive officer of the Episcopal Church, a position he held until 2024, he emerged as a prominent voice on social justice issues including racial reconciliation, climate change, evangelism, immigration policy, and marriage equality.



Learning to Speak God from Scratch Why Sacred Words are Vanishing and How We Can Revive Them

by Jonathan Merritt (Convergent, 2018)

Merritt, a religion journalist, wrote this after moving from the Bible Belt to New York City and discovering his spiritual vocabulary no longer landed with people around him. The book takes sacred words one at a time — grace, sin, lost, gospel, and others — and unpacks each through etymology, biblical background, and personal story, closing with a practical (if modest) framework for reviving this kind of language in everyday conversation. It won Englewood Review of Books' Book of the Year and drew praise across a wide ideological range, though several readers found it stronger in its diagnosis of the problem than in its later, more prescriptive chapters.

Caution: the book is written from a broadly evangelical-turned-progressive American Protestant vantage point. Readers from more liturgical or sacramental traditions will want to translate rather than adopt some of it wholesale — his treatment of "grace," for example, is worth reading alongside a more classic Lutheran or Catholic understanding of the term.

Uses beyond traditional ministry circles:

- Book clubs/discussion groups — its chapter-by-chapter, word-by-word structure makes it easy to assign a section at a time and discuss.
- Interfaith or secular-facing conversation — useful for anyone who talks about faith with people who don't share their background, since it models curiosity about a word's baggage rather than defensiveness.

Jonathan Merritt holds an M.Div from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and a M.Th. from Emory University's Chanadler School of Theology. He is a trusted leader at the intersection of faith and culture. Learning to Speak God from Scratch was named Book of the Year by the Englewood Review of Books.





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Two of our three volunteer opportunities are now open — and this is your invitation to step into something meaningful. To serve. To lead. To help create a space where thousands of young people will encounter God, community and a faith that lasts.

Whether you're welcoming participants, assisting behind the scenes or helping bring large-scale moments to life, every volunteer plays a vital role in shaping the Gathering experience.

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Saturday, October 17, 2026

9 am - noon

In Person at St. Mark Storm Lake
ZOOM option also available.

Led by Pastor John Wolf & Pastor Lissa Kahl

Register by Email to
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