

## First Lutheran Church



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Worship 10:00 am

Weekly Newsletter

3.27.25

### Pastor's Ponderings

#### A God of Empathy

Today I Googled, “Horrible things Christians say on social media.” While I’m sure you can imagine some of the results, consider this one, from a “Christian” posting in an atheist chat room:

*“I will be feasting with Jesus while you are starving naked before skin-eating demons.”*

I mean, if you’re going to be an internet troll, I guess go big or go home. Unfortunately, however, I think this is just reinforcing some, perhaps, well-earned Christian stereotypes. If the point was evangelism, I’m guessing the poster did not “win any souls for Christ.” (And if not “evangelism,” well, I’m unsure of the point.)

But this is the danger of social media, isn’t it? It allows us to be keyboard warriors—to type all the mean and nasty and hateful things we want from the relative safety of an anywhere-in-the-world device. But it’s not just social media—email and texting, too, create just enough separation that on these platforms we are emboldened to be more arrogant and rude. Or just downright “un-Christian,” whatever that term might mean in 2025.

And while I’d love to blame Mark Zuckerberg, he simply created a platform for us humans

to behave how we naturally behave. (And then he directed his organization to create algorithms meant to funnel the worst of the behavior to our feeds and causing us to spend more time engaging. More time equals more money equals more Hawaiian islands—but I digress.) I’m letting him off the hook today (mostly) because this human behavior has been around for millennia—and the Apostle Paul proves it to us in his correspondence with the church in Corinth.

In the tenth chapter of his second letter, Paul reports: “For they say [about me], “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.”” (2 Corinthians 10:10) Basically, “You might write it in letters, but you don’t dare say it to our faces.” Paul has a difficult and complicated relationship with the Corinthian church. In the time that lapsed between what we know as Paul’s First and Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul suffered a “painful visit”—his words—to Corinth. After that, instead of making another visit—which he feared would be far too painful—Paul instead wrote another letter “out of much distress and anguish of the heart and with many tears...” (2 Corinthians 2:4) This so-called “Letter of Tears” is missing; it is not part of the Biblical canon because no known copy survives.

It is against this backdrop that we can begin to understand Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. Paul, it appears, is suffering along with the church in Corinth. He tells the church that he wrote that lost, tearful letter “not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.” (2 Corinthians 2:4) In other words, “I am suffering with you—because I love you.” Paul insists

though some in the community may feel he's being a 2,000-years-ago version of a social media troll, that he loves the people of the church in Corinth and that this loving but complicated and fraught relationship is afflicting him with pain and suffering and anguish—just as it does the Corinthians.

This model of love is not of Paul's invention—he's modeled it on God's love made known for us in Jesus Christ. But how, pray tell, can a God-human relationship be anything like a human-human relationship. First, it can't—not entirely, but I'll get to that at the end. For now, let's stretch the comparison between the God-human and human-human relationship to its limits, shall we?

If we believe that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ, then we must believe that God feels human pain. Yes, of course on the cross. But also at the beheading of a friend, and the death of another. Pain at being betrayed into death—by a friend. Pain at the denial of even being known—by the one who was to carry on the mission of his Church. Pain at the scattering of nearly all the rest of his so-called followers. Christ knew earthly pain and suffering and rejection. And the God made known to us in Jesus continues to know and feel human pain and suffering—real physical pain, emotional trauma, and everything in between and beyond—with us and for us. God knows and feels our hatred for one another—whether it is filth posted by a troll on a message board, an emotional outburst whose words can never be unsaid, a strongly-worded letter that even Paul seemingly wishes he could have unsent, or whether it manifests in physical violence or murder. God takes on all this pain and

suffering—with us and for us—and can do it because God showed up here, on this earth, as a human being.

*Paul writes: "For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ." (2 Corinthians 1:5)*

As Christ has suffered abundantly for us, we are given abundant consolation through this very same Jesus Christ—both God and human. Ours is a God of consolation. A God of compassion. A God of empathy.

What does that mean, to have a God of empathy? Brené Brown, professor and author, whose areas of research include courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy, explains "empathy is a vulnerable choice because I know I have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling."

One, empathy is vulnerable. And two, empathy is a choice.

1. To have a God of empathy means that our God is vulnerable. Let's see—born into this world just as us, naked, and unlike most of us, in a feed trough. Last breath taken while also naked—this time while raised high on a cross for all the world to mock and ridicule. This sounds like a vulnerable God to me.
2. Empathy is a choice. I mean, from what I can tell, God is God, and no one made God show up and subject God's very own self to the pain and suffering and rejection of this world. God chose to show up—to be revealed most fully in suffering and death on a cross.

It must follow, then, that ours is a God of empathy. Which means that ours is not a sympathetic God—sympathy, says Brené Brown, stands at a safe distance. Our God does not stand way over there, in some faraway heaven, offering pity and condolences! Impossible! Because our God, made known in Christ crucified, was born into this broken world—and therefore enters all the places of suffering, knowing full-well what human suffering is. Ours *must be* a God of empathy.

Now here is where I need to caution and make a distinction between human-human relationships (and empathy) and God-human relationships (and empathy). Human empathy is so very important because we are not meant to bear our own pain and suffering and despair and affliction. Paul understood this—although I’m not sure he would call it empathy. He explains, “for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.” (2 Corinthians 1:7) And while this may not be the textbook definition, shared suffering and shared consolation is at the heart of empathy.

But human empathy has its limits. Empathy is most effective when we connect with what someone is feeling about an experience and sit with them in this space. But it is not taking on that feeling and feeling it for them—this is dangerous. Dangerous to the other, because we cannot pretend to understand and grasp the vast array and depth of another’s emotions—we can only tap into those emotions within ourselves. Dangerous for us—because taking on all the pain and all the suffering and all the despair and all the afflictions—such an act would certainly crush us, wouldn’t it?

As humans, we can (and must!) empathize with one another, but our capacity to do this is dwarfed by God’s. Paul knows this, which is why he rightly declares, “Our consolation is abundant through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:5) Because Christ first abundantly suffered, Christ now abundantly consoles.

God, in the person of Jesus Christ, took on all the sin and pain and suffering and despair—mine and yours and Paul’s and the Corinthians and the internet trolls and all the people of all time and all places—and the weight of it all should have crushed him—as it would us. Which is why the world thought it had crushed him. But that’s just it—where we cannot take on all the pain and all the suffering and all the despair and all the afflictions, where we cannot overcome death, God can. And does. The cross—and all the suffering that Christ endured—did not crush Jesus, the Messiah. That is not where this story ends. Jesus Christ crucified. Jesus Christ Risen. Jesus Christ in the here and now, in the joy and in the pain. Jesus Christ who is to come. This—my dear siblings in Christ—is, and remains, our abundant consolation.

Amen.

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i [https://youtu.be/1Evvgu369Jw?si=GTkVoAe\\_nFY4DJ9a](https://youtu.be/1Evvgu369Jw?si=GTkVoAe_nFY4DJ9a)

ii Chapter 7, *Atlas of the Heart*, Audiobook, 10:00.



If you have comments or questions, would like to talk, or desire a visit, please call or e-mail either me or the church office.

Peace,  
Pastor Shawn Schneider  
937-726-3831 or  
[pastor@flcgalion.com](mailto:pastor@flcgalion.com)

## This Week at First

### **Worship: Fourth Sunday in Lent**

First Lesson: Joshua 5:9-12

Second Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Gospel Lesson: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

### In-Person Worship



### Sunday – March 30, 2025

**10:00am** - Combined Lutheran Worship at St. Paul in NR

### Tuesday—April 1, 2025

**7:00pm** - Prayer Shawl Meeting at FLC

### Wednesday - April 2, 2025

**6:00pm** - Fellowship Meal before Service

**7:00pm** - Lenten Wednesday Service at FLC

### Friday - April 4, 2025

**9:00am** - "Men's Breakfast at Lulu's in Bucyrus

## *Prayer Chain*

Jeff Weithman, Judy Rock Margaret, Jean Hayes, Kevin McNeal, David Hayes, Barb Keyes, Jennifer Young, Beth Sinden, Nancy Franco, Christa Collins, Dave Gerfen, AJ Rinaldi, Fred Watkins, Kaden Allarding, Linda Kahler, Jo Swain, Haylee Lilly, Paige, Sandy Alley, Scott, Jean Henry, Tina Fuson, Ken Bodkins, Ed Smith, Bobbie Jo Seighman, Nancy Bailey, Jim Harpst, Doll Cass, Phyllis Straka, Jay DeNise, Millie and Brenda Haas, Fred & Betty Sargel, Mary Lou Griebing, Janet Hammermiller and FLC Outreach Ministry. To add someone to our prayer list or prayer chain, call the church office or email us at [pastor@flcgalion.com](mailto:pastor@flcgalion.com)

## *Prayer of the Day*

Creator God, you prepare a new way in the wilderness, and your grace waters our desert. Open our hearts to be transformed by the new thing you are doing, that our lives may proclaim the extravagance of your love given to all through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.



Denise Grandy - April 1  
Barb Howe - April 3  
Julie Sargel - April 4



Mike & Julie Keyes - March 31