



# Diaconal Sunday SERMON

*February 25, 2024*

*By Deacon Gretchen Peterson*

Hi! My name is Deacon Gretchen Peterson and I serve as one of the Assistants to the National Bishop, in the areas of youth ministry and leadership. I'm delighted to join you in your place of worship today, for Diaconal Ministry Sunday! Thank you for welcoming me into your space, on the land and near the waterways where you live, that have been stewarded by the Indigenous People of that land for time immemorial.

All of the readings today – the Old Testament verses from Genesis about the ongoing faith of Abraham and Sarah; the New Testament ones from Romans about the righteousness of faith; and our Gospel reading from Mark with the call to take up our cross and follow Jesus – speak about the power of faith.

The faith we are called into through our baptism into God's family. The faith that is nurtured in us through our born and chosen families. The faith that our congregations and places of ministry invite us into, as we participate in the life of the church.

What are the moments in your life that have strengthened or challenged your faith? Each one of us has a personal story of faith. This story belongs to us and to God – and we get to choose what we want to share of it with those around us.

Faith is nurtured when we get curious about our spiritual life. When we ask questions, when we worship in different ways and in different places. When we read a different translation of the Bible. When we pray in a new way. Our congregations and places of worship can provide wonderful spaces for each of us to flex our spiritual curiosity muscle.

When I was growing up, I always felt like it was ok for me to ask questions about God, Jesus and really about anything concerning my faith or the Lutheran Church. I feel like I grew up in a home and in a church where it was ok to ask questions. A place where it was ok to not just take what was offered to me and say, "Sure, that sounds good." A place where I could perhaps push back a bit and ask "But, why??? How???"

I have a clear memory of studying for my confirmation test – remember those tests, in front of the whole congregation? I'm glad we don't do those anymore! I felt the added pressure as the PK – pastor's kid. I remember the pressure, most likely self-imposed, to do well. I couldn't embarrass myself in front of the whole congregation, not the pastor's kid.

At that time, we had to do a written exam, in preparation for the final oral exam. There was one question I was stumped on – something about how many sons did Noah have. I was probably just wanting to get the answer and move onto the next question, so I remember trying to get the answer out of my dad. He told me it was there, in the Bible passage. I just needed to read it more carefully.

I remember thinking "Well, what's the point of being the pastor's kid if the pastor isn't going to just give me the answer?" But really, I just needed to do some of the hard work myself. I needed to do some of the searching.

Sometimes, we need to dig a bit deeper into the text, the conversation, the moment of service – and then not only will we possibly find an answer, but our faith might be nurtured through that process as well!

What are some moments in your life, when you have felt like you were supported in questioning things about your faith? When you were given the tools to dig deeper and perhaps uncover something about God on your own?

Our God is a relational God and invites us into moments of spiritual curiosity. We can be curious about prayer, liturgy, worship, scripture. As Rachel Held Evans pointed out in her book, *Inspired – Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, quote:"

*"Our relational God has given us a relational sacred text, one that, should we surrender to it, reminds us that being people of faith isn't as much about being right as it is about being part of a community in restored and restorative relationship with God." She goes on to say: "For Jewish readers, the tensions and questions produced by Scripture aren't obstacles to be avoided, but rather opportunities for engagement, invitations to join in the Great Conversation between God and God's people that has been going on for centuries and to which everyone is invited."*  
End quote.

So, it's not about being right. It's about being part of a community of faith that is restored and in restorative relationship with God. It's about looking for these opportunities to engage with scripture. It's about remembering we are invited into the Great Conversation.

When our faith leads us to try to be that kind of faith community, then I think we are living into the diaconal, prophetic hope of Jesus. The hope that our lives on this earth mean something, for the glory and love of God. That we put aside some of our ego, acknowledging that we don't need to be right all the time. And instead, looking around and wondering "How can I be of service in the world, in the community, in this place today? How can my story of faith, that has been nurtured, inspire me to serve others?"

At our National Convention in 2019, the assembled delegates passed a motion to accept the public document called *Reimagining our Church*. It is a wonderful document that many are using to guide the conversation around the future of our church, at many different levels. If you haven't read it or the *Reader's Guide*, I encourage you to do so. You can find it on the ELCIC website.

One of my favourite lines in the document is from the introduction written by Bishop Susan:

*"We are all, whether lay or consecrated or ordained, being invited to consider how best we might participate in God's mission and together to imagine and build a church which is missional, diaconal and prophetic."*

We are all invited into this faith journey and this reimagining of the church. We are all invited into the conversation.

Deacons love to speak about the diaconal work that we engage in but the truth is we are all engaging in diaconal work. Because it is through our baptism into God's family that this diaconal call is placed within each of our hearts. It's not just something that deacons do, although we are skilled at pointing the church to diaconal work. All of us are encouraged to engage in the diaconal work – in the work of looking to our communities to see where the needs are and in the invitation issued back to the church, to help meet those needs!

Our faith is a true gift. God invites us into relationship with God-self – to help deepen our faith through the journey. This also leads us into looking beyond ourselves, beyond our church pews, to see where else we might each be of service in our communities. Our faith is strengthened not only through worship, prayer and scripture reading but also through our service to others.

I invite each of you to engage in conversation over your next coffee time or potluck as a congregation. Look around and point out when you see someone being of service to another. Lift that up! This is diaconal work! Think of times you've seen members of the congregation – members in your community – serve others. Think of a time you have served another. All of this is diaconal!

May each of you be strengthened in faith, as you set your sights on being missional...being diaconal... being prophetic in your church, in your community, and in the world.

*Amen.*