

Sermon for the celebration of a new collaborative ministry between St. Luke's, Madison and Good Shepherd, Sun Prairie

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In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

What a blessing and gift it is to be here today! We are here at God's invitation, and we would do well to name some of the gifts and blessings that have brought us together at this moment. From our readings today I'd like to name one call of God's spirit to the people of Good Shepherd and St. Luke's parishes, and their response to God's invitation.

In our first reading, the prophet challenges God's people, including you and me. We're told, "be strong and courageous; do not be frightened" and we are reminded, "the Lord God is with you wherever you go."

"Do not be frightened." Fear is a pretty natural response to a number of different circumstances, isn't it? Our daughter Mia came to us as a foster kid in need of a forever home about twelve years ago, when she was five. *I have her permission to share this with you, by the way.* About six months after she came to live with us, we adopted her. As we had some experience in the foster care system and Mia's need for a home was immediate, the whole thing came together pretty quickly. We were getting ready for her first Christmas with us. My wife comes from a very large family and it is their tradition to get everyone (her parents and all eight siblings and their families) together after Christmas. On this particular year the gathering was to be hosted by two of Gina's siblings in the twin cities. The morning after the party, Mia and I decided to check out the hotel swimming pool. As I stood in the shallow end of the pool, my arms stretched out wide, I called to Mia, who was still standing up on the pool deck, "jump!" I invited her again and again. She'd smile, wring her little hands, pace a little bit, and... she just couldn't do it. Her whole world had changed, again, and so many things, including Gina and I, were new to her. And the thought of jumping was very scary. I told her it was okay, but I assured her I was a very good catcher and that if she wanted to try jumping I was positive I'd come through. After a bit more hand-wringing, she got a very serious look on her face, balled up her little hands into fists, closed her eyes, and made a running leap into my arms. After that, I spent the better part of 90

minutes catching her again and again. We both laughed. I may have cried a little. It was a graced moment.

In a sense, both St. Luke's and Good Shepherd parishes came to a point in their journeys as communities of faith when they were invited by our loving God to "jump!" It was time to try something new, to reimagine ministry, consider their call to discipleship, and to begin to ponder, pray, plan and dream about what might be next. The praying, planning, pondering and dreaming led to the challenge to take a leap into this new relationship, this new way of witnessing to the gospel in this corner of God's vineyard. This is a leap that no one took lightly or casually. We know and believe that there was a good deal of letting go, a lot of trusting, plenty of hope, and a conviction that this new venture is a way to sustain the mission, ministry and outreach of these two parish communities.

In the lives of these parishes, and in our own lives, God invites, "Jump!" This is not easy or even natural, this surrender and letting go, and yet is life-giving and the way that, again and again, God saves us. The rest of our first reading from Joshua reminds us: "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go..."

People of St. Luke's and Good Shepherd: we have profound respect and gratitude for your response to God's invitation to "jump!" You are in many ways pioneers and a bright light to all of us in the diocese as we look to how this new way of collaborative mission and ministry unfolds.

But once we've leapt, there's this business of living, learning, and growing together in different ways, isn't there? Our second reading today from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans reminds us that, in essence, we're all in this thing together. The gifts we've been given, in all their wonderful variety and diversity, are to be shared, and together they will help to build up the Body of Christ. Good Shepherd and St. Luke's both have their own wonderful unique histories, stories, ministries and ways of being the Body of Christ. One of the gifts of this type of collaboration, this new beginning, are the possibilities that may arise as you begin to learn about each other, come together for certain times of formation or worship, and perhaps engage in some shared outreach projects down the road. With more people come more gifts and more manifestations of the Holy Spirit at work.

I wouldn't be surprised if, in the very early conversations about this coming together, back when budgets, spreadsheets and other factors were pointing to the simple truth that things could not continue as they used to, there may have been a

moment or two when, in exasperation and resignation, facing some hard truths, some may have said, acknowledging the need for a change, “Well, what are we going to do now?” However, as questions were explored, momentum built, and possibilities were becoming reality, the same words could well have been asked, but in a different way: “Well, what are we going to do now?!!”

St. Paul, in Romans, is reminding us of the beauty and abundance of God’s gifts, alive and well in God’s people, and that includes the likes of you, and me. Where once we might have been tempted to see scarcity, St. Paul encourages us, in Christ, to see the abundance that is ours in the Holy Spirit. Thank you to Good Shepherd and St. Luke’s parishioners for witnessing to the abundance, creativity and hope of God’s spirit at work in you.

So the leap of faith has been taken. God’s invitation to “jump!” has been heeded. Careful, thoughtful and transparent planning followed. Some of the gifts of collaborative mission and ministry are already being experienced and explored. While each parish is still very much who they are, new connections, bonds and relationships are being formed, which is how it works in the Body of Christ.

Jesus, in today’s gospel reading, gives us the commandment that is going to strengthen, support, and bless this new beginning. “My commandment to you is this: love one another as I have loved you.” And in case we aren’t sure what that means, Jesus is clear that it’s the lay-your-life-down kind of love that he lived, breathed and exemplified in his ministry among us, during his Passion and crucifixion, and it was this kind of love that raised him from the dead. This love calls forth new life from death, again and again.

In a few moments, Fr. Don will promise that he’s going to endeavor to exemplify this kind of love in the ministry he shares with both St. Luke’s and Good Shepherd. We pray for him and the ministry entrusted to him as we embark on this new day.

Parish leadership from both faith communities have evidenced this kind of love as they have walked through many, many conversations with fellow parishioners, answered questions, sought counsel, and continued to take the leaps of faith, hope and love that helped bring us to this new day.

Parishioners have shown this kind of love in their willingness to embark on this new journey separately as two parishes and yet at the same time together as something new that didn’t exist before. Change is rarely easy, and I think change

in church is even less easy! And yet here we are, and we know it's the love of Christ that has brought us to this new day.

So we celebrate the invitations to “jump” that come to us as communities of faith and as individuals. We give thanks for the abundance of gifts lavished on us so freely and in such amazing diversity by the God who loves us, and we pray for the grace, as the Body of Christ communally and individually on the journey, to embody the love of Jesus, who is always relentlessly calling us from despair to hope, from fear to courage, and from death to life. Amen.