

From the Bishop

“After [Jesus] dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.” (Matthew 14:23)

As I write these words I am preparing to go on a prayer retreat along with about 15 pastors and deacons from this synod. I invited each of the deans and one other from each of the conferences, as well as those in our Re-Imagining Church Cluster, for the first prayer retreat. The plan is to offer more of these retreats on a regular basis so that each of our pastors and deacons in the synod might have an opportunity for this time of prayer and renewal. The first of these retreats is funded by monies left over from Portico Wellness dollars from a couple of years back.

“Awaken My Heart” is the theme of the retreat, a 48-hour period in which we will spend time unburdening ourselves of those things that weigh us down and distract us from being attentive to God’s presence. There will be time for personal reflection, for experiencing different forms of prayer, and exploring practices that seem to work and fit the person. One presentation is themed, “pray as you can, not as you can’t.”

Several years ago I began working with a spiritual director and discovered the value of having someone who accompanies me on a spiritual journey. I’ve someone who listens to me, offers feedback, suggests resources, and holds me accountable. My spiritual director accompanies me on my spiritual journey. It is a journey with ups and downs and twists and turns, but a journey nonetheless. We in the Lutheran tradition are very good at talking theology and using our head to think about matters of faith and God’s love for us and all creation. Spiritual practices like this prayer retreat are opportunities to more fully integrate the head and the heart and to learn to be more attentive to the presence of God in our lives and the world around us.

Jesus himself needed time for solitude, to get away from the demanding crowds, and to spend time in prayer with his Father in heaven. In Gethsemane when he knew the end was drawing near he prayed to know and do the will of God. Not my will, by thine be done, Jesus prayed. Knowing what to do and where to go and how to spend his time did not come automatic. He spent time seeking to know where God was leading him.

“Awaken My Heart” is offered as a missional experiment. I am interested in seeing how it is received and what we will learn. I know we will care for one another, spend time dwelling in the Word of God, singing, conversing and reflecting on our lives and ministries. We will talk about how things are with our soul. I pray it will be a time of attentive listening and caring.

Jesus went away and sought to know where God was leading. “Awaken My Heart” is also a time for us to be silent and listen for directions. In days when we are trying to figure out how to be Church in a new day, how to reach people caught up in a frantic lives or hunkered down in their own interests, it seems good and right to listen deeply for the voice of God and be open to the Spirit’s leading.

We often hear the Church needs to change. But change in what way? What of our past do we hang onto and what things do we let go? These are matters that require great thought and lots of prayer. As we seek to live into God’s Promised Future, listening for the voice of God and discerning where the Spirit is leading are vital practices for church leaders. We have the promise

of the Risen Christ who says, “lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). May we trust this Promise and be attentive to God’s presence among us.