

One of the primary metaphors for life that resonates with me is *stumbling*. As in, we stumble into the various events and activities of life. Afterward, we make sense of whatever it was that happened. Such a perspective challenges mightily the notion that we are in charge and the agency with which we believe we live our lives. While control and agency are clearly important—and Lord knows there are so many things that we are responsible to and for—there seems an element of grace—or divine humor—embedded in the stumbling metaphor. We didn’t manufacture or produce so many of the aspects that make up life as we know it. We stumbled into them.

A recent anecdote offered by a colleague drove this home. She relayed the true story of a young minister who was so excited at occupying his first call to a parish. He loved the people. He loved the community. He felt that ministry together was really taking off. About six months into his pastorate, he visited a woman in the hospital who was about to die. She whispered to the minister that she couldn’t help herself, but she needed to be honest with him. As he leaned into hear her confession, she continued.

It seems that the woman was a part of the call committee that brought the pastor to the church. “While we liked you,” the woman admitted, “we wanted to call the other candidate.” It seems that the call letter intended for *that* individual was sent to the minister now hearing her confession, and the letter of rejection intended for him was inadvertently sent to the other candidate! Talk about a death bed confession! Geesh!

To say that the minister was crestfallen goes without saying. He realized that the people with whom he thought he was doing great ministry were really being exceedingly nice. They were hiding from him their initial preference for the other candidate. However, what it eventually revealed to the minister was that regardless of the circumstances of your call, there is always good and important—even grace-filled—work that can be done. And did happen for this individual.

In some religious traditions, clergy are moved to and fro without little or any say on the part of the parish. This, of course, underscores the abiding principle within those traditions that, one, there is no “perfect” candidate, and, two, ministry isn’t a popularity contest, but it is something that we work on and develop into together.

While, such a perspective is helpful reminder to us to let go of the idea of perfection and the need to continually build on each other’s strengths, it is a bit simplistic in its application. It denies, for example, the myriad gifts of the Spirit that are present in any given context and the ideal of working to match the extant gifts for the upbuilding of the immediate religious community and the broader civic community. For instance, if all were amazing accountants, it wouldn’t necessarily help to call a minister with amazing accounting background and focus. We are able to thrive more often than not with the identification, appreciation, and use of the variety of gifts in a community. And matching those gifts is key.

Today we observe the Feast of the Epiphany, and on Sunday we will celebrate this day in our liturgy. Epiphany begins with the story of the Wise Men paying respect to the infant Jesus. It is a sign of the importance of who Jesus is. Epiphany derives from the Greek root that means “to

make manifest.” And that is what the whole of the Sundays after the Epiphany are interested in. They tell stories of how God’s reality is made manifest in the human Jesus. In Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, the solidarity of God with us is confirmed. In the wedding at Cana, the power of God to transform our reality (and add to the delight of all) is underscored. In the various healing stories that we hear about in the Sundays after Epiphany, the restorative and reconciling presence of God walks out of the page into our reality.

The beauty of the season of Epiphany is that while we seek to find the various ways that God was manifest in Jesus, the hope is that we also continue to realize the myriad ways that God continues to manifest Godself in the very flesh of those who travel with us, in our community. God was not only manifest 2000 years ago. God continues to make God’s self known in us and through us. As the wonderful Lutheran tagline reminds us: God’s work. Our hands. We are part of this together. And I am thankful for your part, your hands, in our life together.