Sermon: You Will Never Walk Alone

As many of you know, I was recently in Dortmund, Germany for a Christian event called *Kirchentag*. The best way to describe it is to say that it was a weeklong festival with more than 100,000 participants each day. According to the *Kirchentag* website, it was established in 1949 as part of Lay movement to be *"a faith-based open forum for democracy, human rights, ecumenism (that's Christian churches coming together from all different denominations) and raising awareness against every kind of discrimination."* It has since become an international event, welcoming visitors from several other countries through partnerships with Germany's Protestant churches.

It all sounds nice but I did wonder, "Why me, God? Why did I get a call, to go to Germany? After all, I'm not a pastor, am I really the right person for this? I was reluctant, yet excited, and very nervous because I wanted to make sure that I represented our Conference well, but had no idea what I was doing! I sought guidance from others, but it would prove that God was guiding, leading and directing my steps all along. I would never walk alone.

Given the unexpected circumstances and call to go to Germany at the last minute, it was no coincidence that the theme of this year's

Kirchentag was “Was für ein Vertrauen!”, which translates to “What confidence!” or “What faith!” Meaning...What is faith? I needed to learn this:

What does it mean to be led by God? In Proverbs 3: 5-6, it says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”

In the large exhibition hall, I felt drawn to a Missions display, and their activity had an extremely profound effect on me. We were asked to pray for a certain part of the world, and I got Tanzania! Then, we participated in what they called a “trust walk” meaning, walking with our eyes closed. We walked across stepping stones made out of boards with pillows between them so that they were wobbly, and there was a banner above that said, “You will never walk alone.”

Those words suddenly became so real. As I was praying for other people having to trust someone else to lead me while taking every unknown step blind, I thought about how God has led me in my life. And how God will lead you also. That Scripture in Proverbs comes alive when we surrender ourselves to trust and faith in God. God is there to light the way. But when God does light the way, like when I got that surprising call to go to

Germany, I still needed to yield to following in faith, trusting that God was there.

I learned that being led by God is never a passive activity. Faith is an action, it takes an active role. Like our Gospel story just read. There are four characters, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, and the man left in the ditch. We've heard this story many times, and some of us would identify with either the priest and Levite or the Samaritan. We are all told to be good Samaritans. I think it's important for us to see that the Samaritan, unlike the other two, was on a journey, and it was extremely inconvenient and risky for him to stop and help the man. Yet the scripture said he stopped because he was "moved with compassion." I think that is our starting point for understanding what it means to be led by God; what it means to put faith in action. Compassion changes everything. It changed me.

STORY

There was a discussion that the UCC group led at *Kirchentag* to educate visitors on how easy it is to discriminate against another person who is outside our race, ethnic group and social class. Some of you may have heard of the words "White Privilege" which means never having to think about your whiteness; to not live fearfully or be scared, or feel others

glaring at you while shopping, or in any circumstance feeling anxious because of your race. That is a white privilege. While that is a difficult concept in and of itself, I learned how impossible it is to see, as long as we remain a priest or a Levite, who looks away and continues to cross over on the other side of the road. We think as long as we don't see the 'other' or stop to listen to their stories, that we do not have any responsibility to make a difference. Quite honestly, I struggled with this because I never thought about it until going to Germany. I listened to leaders of Nations who had suffered so much violence and found ways to heal and work together, and I learned it was compassion that changed everything. When those who were privileged worked together with those who were suffering, all were lifted to a better place. Because at some point, all of us here must see that before God, we are each other's neighbors, and we must seek to care for one another.

Jesus is our good Samaritan, and every one of us have been robbed of this truth that we are actually the ones lying in the ditch. We are all in need of grace and compassion, and for someone to bring us to a place of healing. But to be that person, we can no longer look away. Compassion for people who don't look like us, people of color and of other races and ethnicities is

our first step of faith. These insights shook me and changed the way I thought about a lot of things.

Speaking of being “shook”, on the second evening of *Kirchentag*, the UCC/UEK partnership participated and led an English-speaking worship service in an old church that was built in the 13th century. The church itself dates all the way back to Charlemagne. Just being in that place at that time made me think about how amazing that is! It wasn’t a coincidence that the sermon was all about trusting God’s path for us. Especially amazing was the setting, this old stone church had stood the test of time, with faithful believers gathering for worship for over 1200 years and they are still meeting in this church! The history, the sermon, and being in that exact time and space had me asking myself how did I ever get here? And it was like I woke up; only God could have led me. Only God. Faith brought me there and God showed the way. That’s what God wants to do for every one of us.

Have you ever heard that song, “Life Changes”, by Thomas Rhett? There is a line in it that says, “You make your plans and you hear God laughing.” Proverbs 16:9 puts it like this: “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.” Sometimes we laugh and sometimes we are left scratching our heads because we do not know where it will all lead us. That

is how I felt on this entire trip! That is how I feel right now, speaking from this pulpit today. I never saw this coming, but someone else did!

So, God led me to *Kirchentag*. I walked into it full of anxiety, having no idea what to expect. I discovered that God had a plan beyond my plans. I met new friends and experienced deep spiritual transformation as I learned what it means to be led, what it means to never be alone and sense God's presence. God showed me the unconditional Christian love that surrounded Dortmund during that week and I continue to feel it now. One small step of faith led me to a whole new awareness of God's activity in the world. It has renewed my soul and my relationship with God. I was asked to talk about my experiences in relationship to Scriptures and I guess I'm preaching a bit here this morning, and I ask really? How did I get here? When I told my story to Pastor Sharon she also sensed that I had something more to say, something for us as a church community. With her guidance, & support, I am speaking here today, because my life has been changed knowing that I never need to walk alone. I wanted you to know that too; you will never walk alone.

Let God lead you to the places and the people you'd least expect. Have faith that where you are, who you are with, and what you are going through is part of God's plan for you. God will bring opportunities into your life so

you too have to step out in faith, perhaps walk to the other side of the road, or take a plane to the other side of the world! When you step out, with compassion and trust, you can know; You will never walk alone. And, knowing that you will never walk alone, makes faith and its works possible!