

This sermon started about two years ago. It's had kind of a peculiar evolution because it was triggered by a conversation that had nothing to do with church or the Christian faith. But from the moment the conversation ended, a couple of questions have been eating away at me. And later that same day I thought to myself, "I gotta preach a sermon about this sometime."

This happens to pastors on occasion. You come across a great story or illustration and you say to yourself, "That would make a great sermon illustration!" and then you go about trying to find a Biblical text to make it fit. Homiletics professors, the men and women who teach preaching classes at the seminary, frown on the practice of starting with a story and then finding the Biblical text to back it up. "That's putting the cart before the horse," they would say disapprovingly.

But as Pastor Amber has explained the last couple of weeks, the next cycle of the Narrative Lectionary doesn't start until September, so during the month of August she and I have the opportunity to pick our own texts, so today is finally my opportunity to pick my own texts and preach the sermon that has been percolating for two years.

This conversation I refer to took place on a Monday morning at Panera. I had been meeting with Pastor Jacqui, as it is my usual Monday morning habit for the St. Barnabas pastors to meet for breakfast at Panera. As we were walking out, I noticed a man who looked to be a grandpa sitting in the booth nearest the door. He was wearing a Concordia sweatshirt, like the one you see on the cover of the bulletin. I had never met this man, but simply based on the fact that he was wearing a Concordia sweatshirt I felt emboldened to stop and say, "Hi, are you a Cobber?" He explained that he had not attended Concordia, but that his grandson was now attending there. I told him that I had attended Gustavus, another of those fine ELCA colleges, but that I had many friends who went to Concordia. We maybe talked another minute and then I headed on my way.

There was nothing unusual about exchanging pleasantries with a stranger in this way. But I got to thinking about what had just happened. I had walked past four other people sitting in their booths and maybe had even made eye contact with some. I may have nodded to acknowledge them, but I didn't stop to talk to anyone else. I stopped to talk to the man with the Concordia sweatshirt. Why was that? I guess it was because his sweatshirt told me that we might have something in common – not even that we had attended the same college, but we maybe had attended similar colleges, both associated with the ELCA.

I remember a similar encounter at a motel in the New York area in 1964 when my family drove out there for the World's Fair. My sister and I were playing catch in the parking lot when we noticed one of the cars had a dealer logo saying "Moberg Motors, Cokato, MN." We were so excited to think that there might be someone from our hometown staying at the same motel 1200 miles away! We ran to share our discovery with our parents, who went to the main desk and asked what room the people were staying in who owned that car. We went and knocked on their door and it turned out that they didn't live in Cokato, but the man had grown up there and he still came back to buy his cars from Waldo Moberg. Even though we didn't know them, even though they didn't live in Cokato, their having the slimmest connection to us, together with being so far from home, was like finding dear lost friends and we talked for about thirty minutes. We had never met them before and we have never seen each other since. There were many other people in the motel that evening and we didn't try to talk to them. But again, because we thought we might have something in common, we were brave enough to start a conversation with someone we didn't know.

That got me to thinking – I see people all the time that are wearing something that would indicate that they are probably Christian. It might be a cross necklace or a fish lapel pin. It might be a shirt or sweatshirt with a church logo. It might be a bumper sticker on their car that says, "Join me at (and then the name of their congregation)." But I have never stopped and said, "Hi, there. I notice you are wearing a cross. I'm part of St. Barnabas Lutheran Church. What church community are you part of?"

Maybe you have started a conversation that way, but I haven't. Why is that, I ask myself? Why would I be willing to start a conversation with a stranger about their college or hometown, but I wouldn't venture to start a conversation with a fellow Christian about their congregation? That's the question that started gnawing at me as I walked away from Panera that morning.

Two possible answers have occurred to me. First, I think I might be concerned that they would perceive me as an overzealous person who is seeking to convert them, like the older woman from the Baptist church in my hometown who used to walk the streets handing out tracts to the kids asking us if we've been

saved. I thought she was a little kooky, and even though that would not be my intent in starting the conversation, the other person might think I'm kooky in that same way. So maybe I don't start the conversation because I fear what the other person will think of me.

Another reason I don't start the conversation may be that I'm worried about where the conversation will go. What if the woman replies that she wears the cross necklace because it was her mother's, but she herself has no interest in being part of the church. What if the man replies, "What flavor of Lutheran are you? Are you part of that liberal group that let's women be pastors and welcomes gays, or do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?" I actually had someone ask me that question in the locker room at the health club. I got to tell you, it's a little weird having a theological conversation with a towel wrapped around you. Having had an experience like that can make one reticent about starting another conversation.

I realize that both of those reasons basically boil down to the same thing. I don't ask because I fear something – I fear being perceived as kooky or I fear being judged as not being a real Christian.

But as I continued to have this conversation with myself and pictured the man wearing the Concordia sweatshirt that started it all, two brief scripture passages came to mind, the ones we read from Galatians and Romans. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" and "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Here's the mental image I get from those phrases. What if each morning as I walk into my closet and try to decide what shirt I'm going to wear that day, what if as I put on that shirt I also tell myself that I am "putting on Christ" for the day? What would it be like to have the mindset that I clothe myself with Christ?

My purpose in doing so would not be to convert another person to become a Christian. My primary purpose in clothing myself with Christ would be that I might be Christ to whoever I meet. And what would that mean? What does it mean to be Christ to another person? To me, first and foremost, being Christ to another person means treating them the way Jesus would treat them. How did Jesus treat others? I get the sense from the gospel stories that Jesus radiated warmth and respect to those he met, showing a genuine interest in them and their situation. He practiced the Golden Rule, treating others the same way he would like to be treated himself.

With that in mind, if Jesus noticed someone wearing a cross necklace or a fish lapel pin, I think he would want to affirm them in their faith journey, wherever they may be on the way. So if I "put on Christ", I can do that same thing. The way I phrase my opening line is important. I would not suggest saying, "I see you are a Christian." I would begin by simply identifying what I see. "I see you are wearing a cross necklace." "I see you are wearing a fish pin." My second statement would not be, "Why do you wear that?" or "Are you a Christian?" Instead, I'd follow up by saying something about myself, something like, "I'm part of a church community called St. Barnabas." And then I'd ask, "Are you part of a church community?" If they say "yes," I might say, "That's great! It's good to be part of a church community, isn't it! Blessings to you. Have a great day!" I don't need to say anything more than that and I can be on my way. Or I might try one more question, "Tell me something about your church that you're excited about," and then I'd affirm what they have to say and then tell them something at St. Barnabas that I think we do well.

If they say "no," they're not part of a church community, I wouldn't ask them "why not?" That would put them on the defensive. I think I'd go back to focusing on what I see. I'd ask, "I like your cross (or fish pin). Tell me about it." They might say, "Well, I'm spiritual but not religious" or "I believe in God, but I'm disillusioned with the church." To that I'd reply, "I understand. But your spirituality is obviously important to you because you're wearing it. I wish you well on your faith journey. Have a great day!"

I realize there's a good reason for the old advice to not talk about religion or politics because it always has the potential to blow up in your face and have the conversation go somewhere you had no intention of going. But it grieves me that Jesus prayed that his followers, his church, would be one – and yet so often we allow the church to break down into factions that are suspicious and judgmental of each other.

So I'm making a commitment to you and to myself today that in the coming weeks, I will not allow fear to keep me from saying a word of encouragement to a brother or sister in Christ. I figure that if someone is wearing a cross or fish pin, they do so because it is important to them and they want it to be seen by others. I will "put on Christ" and wish them well. If you feel led to try the same thing, let me know what kind of reactions you get.