

I'll never forget that evening at Lady of the Valley Catholic church in La Jara, Colorado. I was a youth pastor at the time and I was there with a busload of my youth group. We were there for a week doing a variety of service projects with San Luis Valley Christian Community Services. San Luis County at that time was statistically the poorest county in America and heavily populated with Mexican immigrants. We were staying at Lady of the Valley, with the boys sleeping on the floor in fellowship hall, and the girls sleeping in the back of the sanctuary where it was carpeted and it was sort of an open narthex.

On this particular evening, we needed to be away from the church because there was a wake scheduled there - a visitation - for an older woman who had died in the congregation. No problem, we'd just clear out and come back when the wake was over. So after working hard all day at various projects in the valley, we headed into the larger town of Alamosa that night for some burgers and some time at the water park.

So after a lighthearted and fun night playing in the water park, we headed back to Lady of the Valley. Everybody had cleared out from the wake, so the girls headed into the sanctuary, the boys to fellowship hall to settle in for the evening. Shortly after the girls entered the sanctuary, however, they ran back to the rest of us, screaming. "There's a dead body in there!" And sure enough, as we all walked into the sanctuary, there in the back of the sanctuary by the sleeping bags was a circle of lit candles, and in the middle of the candles, an open casket with the body of the woman who had died. It is a tradition in some Spanish speaking churches for the wake - and the body - to remain through the night with lit candles. Now, this is not a visual our kids were used to, particularly in the very room where they were sleeping.

Relieved there wasn't an actual emergency, we quickly figured out a strategy for the night. We would all sleep in fellowship hall that night. Fine. Almost everyone began transitioning to the new plan. All except for Kari. Kari was a girl who had been struggling emotionally, even battling suicidal thoughts, which we, the adult leaders, knew about. While all the other girls gladly moved to the fellowship hall, she went and camped out on the floor by the candles, just staring at the casket. There she remained. Word came to me about this, and I along with others were concerned about Kari's emotional state. Was she OK? I went in to check in with her.

"Hi Kari."

"Hi."

"Are you OK?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Why do you want to be in here right now?"

"I don't know. I'm just thinking."

"Do you want to talk?"

“No.”

Now, I wasn't necessarily reassured about how she was doing, she seemed kind of despondent to me, but I didn't know what else to do. So I said, “If you need to talk, let me know, OK?”

“Sure.”

When I came back to the group, it was Rebecca's turn, and she walked into the sanctuary. Now, Rebecca was Kari's leader, a mentor to her who had been her small group leader first in confirmation and then in high school. She had earned the right to be trusted. Rebecca just went in there and sat down next to Kari, didn't say much, and they just sat together for a while, the two of them. Eventually, they were talking and Rebecca put her arm around her. And they talked some more. Eventually, they both came walking out together. Rebecca was a lifeline for Kari - a lifeline Kari could see, and hear, and touch. Rebecca was Christ to Kari, for it was God who showed up in the flesh right next to Kari.

The truth is, it was Christ who was in Kari, too, beckoning the people of God to be there for Kari.

Soon Kari was back with the group, which warmly received her. Kari was in a community that cared about her, and Kari knew it. At times, she could see, and hear and touch the word of life in those around her.

Luther once wrote that we are Christ's, with and without the apostrophe. So with the apostrophe, we are Christ's. We belong to Christ who has claimed us and redeemed us. Without the apostrophe, we are Christs, meaning Christ lives through us for other people, through our actions and our presence. That's what we saw that night at the Lady of the Valley.

The average American does not view everyday life as a place where God hangs out. Not in this crummy, mundane world of mine - the world I can see, hear and touch. Where is God? Well, God is spiritual, of course, above us somewhere in the ether. I, on the other hand, am living in a material world and I am a material being. OK, that's a song by Madonna in the 80's. It happens to be how we perceive things, though.

Observers have called this “functional atheism,” believing in God but living as though there were no God. Most Christians are functional atheists, not imagining or perceiving God as active in this material world of ours - not perceiving that we can see, hear and touch God. We may *agree* that God is at work in this world, but it's just information to us - an idea that lives in our heads.

Kari was a sensitive person who struggled with feeling like her soul was stranded in a material body that was a long way from God. Until someone reminded her that God was right there and that her life was priceless because God says so.

The writer of John gives voice to this: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” And we declare it, says John, so that we might have fellowship with you.

About that word *fellowship*. Notice how everything in this passage is “we?” We declare what we have heard, what we have seen, what we have touched, etc. The God who has become flesh and dwelled

among us becomes a part of us. We see, hear, and touch this God right here in the material world God made. And as the writer of John says, “we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us.”

Rebecca declared this message to Kari, Kari experienced it, and she was reconnected and had fellowship with us.

It is no accident that God shows up most powerfully in that which we can see, hear and touch. In the Word of God we can hear, in a loving face we can trust, in the bread or water of God's promises, in the touch of another. Let us never forget that when it says in John that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, it takes root and finds expression in community, in fellowship, in people we can see and hear and sometimes touch, who care for each other and who celebrate the word of life together, who go on journeys together. And there is the incarnate God among them.

You've heard me talk about Martin Luther's teaching, what he called “the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints.” For Luther, this meant believers getting together to share and converse about this thing called faith; to share and converse about how we experience this God who shows up with the gift of life and the strength to bear our burdens, who calls us forth to work with him for the purpose of life. In mutual conversation and consolation, God is present.

You've also heard me talk a lot about “faith practices.” I think for many of you, it's been unclear what faith practices are. They are, basically, the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints, building community with each other around Christ. Nothing more, nothing less. And so what follows is conversation with God and each other, about life, about joys, about struggles, about callings. It can happen in a class like GPS, as it did regularly there. It can happen when people pray together. It can happen when we dwell in God's Word together. It can happen when we share highs and lows with each other. It can happen when we are trying to learn and discern what God is doing and wants to do with us. These are practices because any Christian can do them with another Christian. It does not require a pastor or faith formation director to be present. As our mission statement might put it, it is *living* the Word. *Doing it*. We are beyond God as an idea now. Faith practices take us exactly where the writer of John points: concerning the word of life that comes from God, what do we see? What do we hear? What do we touch?

This makes for good conversation. It also the engine for growth in faith and mission. Amen.