

“On Good Friday, preach Easter. And on Easter, preach Good Friday,” was the advice I received as a young pastor back in 2008 (or was it 2009? I forget) from a theologian whose name escapes me at the moment. Although their name no longer resides in my mind, the apt advice has remained. This advice has been on my mind lately as I begin my third year as pastor to the Lutheran Campus Ministry in Denton. All but nine months of my time serving the university communities in Denton has been in the midst of a pandemic and I have seen the startling effects of this pandemic on students, faculty, staff, and their families. The craving for community, the Zoom fatigue, the moments of relaxation, the joy of going maskless, and now the frustration with putting masks back on. For faculty, staff, and students alike it has been difficult to ride the changing tides of this pandemic and its emotional toll.

During the heart of the pandemic, LuMin Denton gathered on zoom and just a few times outdoors for fellowship and faithful conversation about how our Christian faith sustained us through this difficult time. We listened to each other as frustrations, sadness, and joys were shared. And we preached Easter in the midst of what felt like a long Good Friday. When vaccines finally came about and we all started to get vaccinated we joyfully reflected on what where we could see God in the midst of those challenging pandemic moments.

Now as the universities are opening up again for more robust in person classes and campus life, we are faithfully throwing caution to the wind and attempting to live out our faith like the early Church did in the book of Acts. (No, we aren't sharing everything in common. That's just not practical during a pandemic.) We are feeding the hungry, visiting with the spiritually sick, and sharing in reflection on Biblical stories that remind us of God's unending, everlasting, compassionate love. This is the ministry that God has called us to in this place, because the university communities in Denton are diverse religiously, racially, and economically.

The student population alone in Denton is full of first generation college students, continues to grow more racially diverse year after year, and also has many food insecure students. Likewise, the student population has many students who are unchurched, overchurched, or just plain done with church because their church experience has been negative. In fact, the UNT office of spiritual life did a survey of graduating students a few years back and the vast majority of those graduating students said they had a negative religious experience on campus overall. Because of these issues, Lutheran Campus Ministry is a ministry of radical hospitality. And in this third school year affected by the pandemic, we are going back to the roots of the Christian church.

Here are just a few examples of what our ministry now looks like: On Wednesdays afternoons this year when street preachers regularly show up on the University of North Texas campus with megaphones and bad theology, I will be there with some camping chairs and a sign that says, “Rant to me about religion and I'll listen.” Far too often, at UNT students hear preachers telling them they are going to hell instead of having a preacher listen to them. And on Thursday evenings our ministry will be providing free food to anyone who stops by our outdoor grill at the Wesley Foundation Building and then a Bible Study for all who are interested. Early adulthood is a foundational time for people's faith and so we share with them God's grace in very physical and sacramental ways: a free hamburger, a listening ear, bread, wine, lemonade, a bag of chips, laughter, and joy.

In Campus Ministry we know that we may just have a moment in these young adults' lives and so we see ourselves working in the vineyard of God to plant seeds or pick rocks or prep the soil or water new growing plants of faith. And we invite you to join us in this ministry. Come out on a Thursday evening. You may end up helping feed 5 or 50 people. You may end up saying a prayer

with someone who isn't religious but they know you are so they ask. You may even end up playing a favorite game of ours: Peruvian Ball Toss.

And we welcome the conversations with your faith communities as well. We would love to hear how you are reaching out to your wider communities in this time and in your place. Although our ministries differ, we can support one another in conversation, prayer, and presence. We are church together.

Jim Rowe
LuMin Denton, Pastor