Well, the day has finally arrived! My first Sunday leading worship with you all…round 2! The good news is that if you are hearing this, it means we actually made it to church this week with no unexpected interruptions. I know that last Sunday did not go as planned, but here we are this week. I thought that writing last week’s sermon was going to be one of the most difficult sermons to write, as I join this new community and we are just beginning to get to know each other. Yet, here I am now, with a completely different first sermon for you all that was even more challenging to write because COVID threw in an extra challenge.

But, here we are, our first Sunday together, but no longer our first worship together after the festivities of yesterday. And, I can say that it is truly an honor and a privilege to be up here today as your Pastor, and not just “Almost Pastor” as I have been calling myself for the last two weeks. Although, I still wish I could have chosen different readings for this week’s preaching but apparently the Spirit was not going to give me an easy one for my first sermon while I recovered. Although, maybe it's fitting for me to preach on this Gospel this week because it is a story of life not going as planned.

There was a phrase that was said a lot in Seminary, “I make plans and God laughs.” It was often said in the context of sharing our call to ministry stories, as many of us in Seminary did in fact NOT plan on going to Seminary, yet God called us anyway, despite our other plans. But, this is true for people other than Seminarians too. How many times have you had plans for how life was going to go, and then life took those plans in a completely different direction? I think it can be quite easy sometimes to look back on our lives lived thus far and see how our life has deviated from the plans that we thought we had made. It can be something as small as planning worship and writing a sermon only to test positive for COVID the night before, or it can be something as big as career changes or moves across the country.

I was going to build bridges. That had been my plan since I was probably about seven. You can ask my parents, I had everything planned out. I was going to go to North Dakota State University, graduate with a degree in civil engineering, and I could even tell you which companies I hoped would hire me after my graduation. I have this photo from one Christmas when I was in middle school with the biggest smile on my face as I wore my new NDSU sweatshirt and hat! And then life happened. The 35W bridge collapsed in MN and I remember watching it on the TV in my grandma’s dining room. We knew people who were on the bridge or had just crossed over it as they watched it crash in their rearview mirrors. Fast forward to when I was in high school and I went away on a church trip to Washington D.C., and I came home telling my parents, “I think I want to be a pastor…” after one of the youth leaders asked me what I wanted to be when I grow up one night during the reflective portion of a worship service. I talked about how I wanted to build bridges, but was terrified of the thought of being left in charge of something like that after witnessing what happens when our feats of engineering fail. It was a lot to shoulder as a 10th grader. And, things were not going how any of us planned.

While it still took me a few years of college to truly accept that I was actually called to be a pastor, I resonate with the people who encounter Jesus in today’s Gospel story. People whose lives are not going quite like they planned after their encounter with Jesus. People who are maybe a little bit unsure of accepting Jesus’ call to follow. After all, how do you respond to ‘Foxes have lairs, the birds of the sky have nests, but the Chosen One has nowhere to rest’ (John 9: 58). People who would like a trial run of this whole discipleship thing, maybe, especially after hearing ‘Whoever puts a hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the reign of God’ (John 9: 62). Or people who maybe didn’t quite understand the “love your neighbor as yourself part” when they suggested sending down fire to destroy the Samaritan town (John 9: 53).

I know that in Seminary we often liked to laugh about the theme of the disciples not understanding what Jesus is saying because it seems like in almost every Gospel story Jesus says something and then the disciples all just seem to have question marks over their heads. Or, they think they understand and I can just see Jesus shaking his head and maybe even rolling his eyes. But, I’ve got to sit in the confusion with the disciples this week. Jesus to me is relational, continually inviting us into relationship with God and one another. Inviting all of us and all of us, including the parts of us that have been formed by relationship with others. So, I never quite know what to do with Jesus in this story who tells people not to say goodbye to their loved ones and not to look back on their lives. Yet, all of Jesus’ other ministry examples have taught me that perhaps that isn’t the end of it either, even if that is where our story ends today.

I keep thinking about this story in relation to the reading from Galatians this morning. While we do not see the world in the same flesh and spirit split that Paul did, I think Paul’s connection of freedom and serving one another in love is a helpful to think about as Lutherans hearing today’s Gospel. As a tradition that confesses to being saved by grace through faith alone, not because of anything we do. Perhaps instead of commanding these people what they must do in order to be a part of God’s kingdom, Jesus is extending an invitation. An invitation to the unexpected and the unplanned. An invitation into a different way of life. An invitation that doesn’t make someone less worthy if they cannot walk away from their father’s burial or cannot bring themselves to simply walk away from their families without saying goodbye. Perhaps it is an invitation to see the place for all of us, in all our uniqueness, in God’s kingdom. Not everyone is called to be a preacher or a teacher, a doctor or a nurse, etc. But there is a place for everyone in the kingdom of God and we are all invited to serve one another in love in our many and varied vocations. The freedom means that we do not have to do something in order to earn God’s love, but it also orients us away from ourselves and towards God and our neighbors. It is a freedom and invitation to show up as our whole selves, perfectly imperfect for the sake of the world. It’s one of the many things I learned on my unplanned path to Seminary.

No one tells you before going to Seminary all the changes that you are going to have to make over the course of four to five years. Perhaps they think that if they did, they would have less people going to Seminary. And they would probably be right! But, as someone who is an intense planner, Seminary also gave me the gift of being open to the unexpected. From the unexpected call to ministry in the first place, to my unexpected assignment to Seattle for internship which created a path forward for me to be called to serve alongside all of you. An unexpected placement for a kid from Minnesota who heard over and over again that I would likely be called to a church in the Midwest because that’s where so many of the Lutheran churches are. I could have followed the path of being a civil engineer, building bridges somewhere in the Midwest, but then I wouldn’t be here. Yet despite all the unexpected twists in the journey so far, perhaps God has a sense of humor after all, since I still see a lot of bridge-building in the work that I am called to do. That we are called to do together.