



When we first moved to the Cleveland area several years ago, one of the initial extensions of gracious hospitality came from this side of the Cuyahoga River. We didn't exactly realize just how far that...friendly rivalry extends not just with cultural neighborhoods and school systems, but even in the church. Nevertheless, as we started on the east side, there was this pastor on the other end, on the other end of a whole different world for some people, evidently, who welcomed me into an area that I didn't know quite so well. The Rev. Jimmy Madsen served at

First Lutheran in Lorain for 40 years, and towards the end of his time with that congregation, he had to experience Jesus' words in the Gospel in a way I hope to never encounter in my time.

Jesus dared people to "destroy [a] temple," and even if he actually meant foreshadowing a cross and resurrection, it still cannot stop us from wondering just exactly what would happen if our own loving, precious temples of worshiping God would be taken away. August 18, 2014, was meant to be just another summer day for Pastor Madsen: another day in preparing for worship that upcoming weekend, figuring out how to reach a community that was drastically changing, how to extend gracious hospitality to defy human logic. And then, at 6:30 in the morning, he got a phone call. First Lutheran in Lorain was burning to the ground, and not because of a random accident or faulty wiring or some nature act of God. No, someone went in and set the precious temple of worshiping God up in flames, never to be caught. With their world-renowned organ and so much else about their nearly 100-year-old building annihilated, the damages were thought to be in the millions of dollars' worth. Someone dared to absolutely ruin an entire community of faith. The problem is you can tear temples down, but you cannot touch the Spirit that will insist on rising even from ashes. You cannot mess with the Spirit that will not only nourish members of congregations, but will find a way to extend gracious hospitality to defy human logic.

After all, one of the ministries that was on-going at First Lutheran before someone attempted to wipe it out was called Family Promise, where those who were hit by hard times for whatever the reason may be, would be given places in the community to not only do the basics of showering and laundry, but also with mailing addresses to help with housing and employment searches. Then, in the evenings, it was the adored temples like First Lutheran who gave them a place to stay for the night, all in hopes to ensure as many children of God as possible would not be homeless. Along the way, the people of First would also provide dinner and breakfast the following morning, even a bag lunch. It was all costly in a variety of ways, and incredibly risky to host overnight lodging. And yet, the Holy Spirit insists on extending gracious hospitality to defy all of our human logic.

And perhaps the most illogical part of God's entire story of extending gracious hospitality to us human beings will be the culmination of this whole season of Lent journey we're traversing now, with plenty of accounts about this Lord of ours who doesn't make any sense whatsoever in his love and compassion for the world. Regardless, someone took him up on his dare to tear down his own temple. Someone, many someones, followed up on that dare all the way to a cross. And yet, for some mind-boggling reason, gracious hospitality was still boldly extended to those who did it. Love and compassion and completely non-sensical mercy were unleashed on the brutal someones. And I have

this feeling that Jesus would even extend that gracious hospitality to the one who attempted to tear the precious temple down for the people of Lorain.

Granted, whoever that someone one was did not succeed. First Lutheran would just worship in a middle school for a while. And if they could not provide a place to stay for the local families hit by hard times, they just grew their food pantry to feed them more, instead. Eventually, they did re-build, but the ultimate temple of Jesus Christ was living in them all along, never to be taken away. So, yes, you can try to tear the temples down, but you cannot touch the Spirit from extending a gracious hospitality that completely defies human logic. You cannot mess with the Spirit that will insist on finding ways of extending love and compassion across rivers or any dividing lines of money or church membership or whatever else we stubbornly cling to in separating us. The ultimate foundation of the Gospel, the very reason for any temple of ours to stand, has something else to say: nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord. It may not make any sense at times, but the Holy Spirit will just keep on doing it anyway, so that the temple of Jesus Christ will always stand within us now and forevermore. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!