



I want to tell you about Leona. If anyone lived up to the Lutheran standard, and perhaps even the stereotype of being a Lutheran, that we have carefully lived out over the generations of worships and Bible studies and circle groups and potlucks and late night council meetings with some stubbornness and passion and joy and not-so-eager to change but love of Jesus and hymns and Scripture and grace and faith sustained by coffee and casserole dishes; if anyone encapsulated *Lutheran*, it was Leona. By the time I came around, she was into her 90s, having lived through her fair share of Sunday morning worshiping, and plenty of other activities during the week in the fellowship hall and numerous other rooms in her second home of sorts in the church building that was only a few miles from the place where she raised her family.

But, by the time I came around, she could no longer get behind the wheel of her Buick sedan. And so I would always meet her in the kitchen, where, of course, everything had its place. And, yes, all those things had their exact same place every time. She was a German Lutheran through and through, to be sure.

For further proof of that cherished identity for Leona, her father-in-law was one of the actual builders of that church building. Her husband was one of the leaders whose presence at far-into-the-evening meetings and numerous other fellowship activities would impact that faith community for its rather formational years. And their children would carry on the family legacy, doing their fair share of council positions and capital campaigns and choir singing and many other tasks that just needed to get done behind the scenes for the church to function at all. By time I came around, many decades into that majestic part of the body of Christ's history, Leona was considered to be the matriarch not just of that family who sprawled out into scores of grand children and great grandchildren and nieces and nephews, but Leona was also the de-facto matriarch of the church: the last one standing of that pivotal generation. And one other thing I was told from the beginning, before I walked into her kitchen for the first time: you did not mess with Leona.

So, safe to say, there was not an abundance of smiles coming from her side of the table. Questions I asked were answered politely, but straight-to-the-point, because the main reason I was there was not for pastoral care chit-chat, but Communion. And, at first, I thought it was just for Leona to carry on her Lutheran routine; although one that was drastically revised over her lifetime. For Leona had witnessed the days when that sacrament was only celebrated once a year, then twice a year, to once every quarter, then monthly, then every other week, and finally for every time they gathered in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning. But from the first time I pulled out my little red box with a small bottle and tiny cups, as I did my absolute best every time to not dare spill anything on Leona's perfectly-set table, I still remember her eyes as she looked into that wafer when it was held up, and the words were spoken, "This is my body given for you." I remember her almost staring into the cup, "This is the new covenant shed for you." This was not the standard Lutheran routine for Leona.

Over time I heard from others in her extended family, that she was not always treated as well as she should have been on the home front. She, of course, would never tell you that. She just had to be strong for her children. She had to be resilient, so that others didn't worry or ask questions. She had to

appear as if she could take it all in stride, so that the rest of her worldly operation could go on just as well, including her second home in the church. She was a German Lutheran, to be sure, but that also meant she had a different connection to the most precious words of Jesus Christ that we heard in the Gospel: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” So, Leona being Leona would say there would be others in her family who needed help more than her. There were others in the church who needed prayer more than her. It’s not that Leona didn’t want or need the ultimate caring life-giving hope-encapsulating physician of Jesus Christ; Leona would just be the one to point Jesus to someone else in the earthly waiting room before he got to her. That’s just the way it was supposed to be: she had to be strong and resilient and an all-around Lutheran force of nature.

But I like to think when Leona was almost spiritually transfixed by the bread and wine, it was almost as if Jesus had reeled her in yet again. Because the true Gospel power of the words is that not only does Jesus arrive for the sick, but those who aren’t always willing to admit that they are one of them. Jesus comes for the ones who may not be as willing to unveil the parts of the life story that are not as well as they make them out to be. Jesus comes for the ones whose spiritual or mental or physical calamity is always put on the way back burner because they’ve been ingrained with a love that constantly looks out for the other ones who might have it worse. Jesus comes for the ones who aren’t always willing to accept the help. But the problem is with this Messiah, this healer, this boundless-mercy physician, is that he doesn’t give up, not even in the face of all the evil and hatred that humanity had to muster against him, or even in the valley of the shadow of death. And not for everyone else, but for Leona, too.

Over time, more smiles started to break through on her side of the table, a little more detail given in responses, a little more authentic Leona emerged, but I know with every time, it wasn’t about who was sitting on the other side of the table, but the one who brought the room and her entire life into the most awe-inspiring grace-filled focus. I like to think that with every Communion celebration, that was just as beautiful around her kitchen table as it was with a packed sanctuary on Christmas Eve or Easter morning; that every time Jesus reeled her in, the divine-and-earthly physician said, “that with this, Leona, no matter how much you insist on being the strength for everyone else, I am going to be the strength for you right here, right now, as I have always been, and will never stop doing so throughout your life, and for all eternity thereafter. This grace, this love, this Gospel, is just as much for you as everyone else.” So, for that Greatest News for Leona and all of us, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!