



During my younger years in northwest Ohio, on a Sunday morning, my mom and I would often use the side door to the church building, and as we made our way up the stairs to the sanctuary, and if we got there early enough, the ushers would be sitting in the first pews by that main entrance, waiting for the leisurely Lutheran crowd to arrive, who may wait until five minutes before the worship started.

Nevertheless, in that group of ushers, all of whom had put in their fair share of years getting there earlier on a Sabbath morning, and counting how many showed up, and passing around the offering plates; but in that group of ushers you could also get the latest and greatest takes on all that was going on with the world: most especially about what was going on with the football team in Columbus, Ohio, or the baseball one at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario here in Cleveland, not to mention the crop prices with corn and soybeans affecting that predominantly farming community.

One of those ushers was a man named Gene; one of those older, gentler souls. One who could read the faces of those coming up the stairs, and would just know if he needed to pull out some humor, or just a quick “Good morning!” with a smile, or commit a little extra time to check in how that one and their family was doing. Sometimes it is the job of the usher to read the room, so to speak: read the room of the heart and mind of that precious child of God, who went out of their way on a Sunday morning to come into that sanctuary: a space that was intended by God to be a sanctuary, a holy safe-haven for all who entered it. Sometimes, it is the job of the usher to be the front porch, in a sense, of the Gospel: to convince the one who is making their way up to the house for all of God’s children, that they are welcome, too; that this house is for them, too. It is the job of the usher to treat the one who sits at the exact same spot in the exact same pew, and has done so every Sunday morning since coming home from their birth at the hospital, to treat that long-standing member the exact same as the one who is showing up for the very first time. Because the usher has to believe that the grace that is preached about up front applies just the same to the side door of a church building and anywhere else in the comings and goings of life. The usher is not only expected to know where bathrooms and nurseries and water fountains are, but to know that any sanctuary is meant to be for those who don’t even know where they are going in life, who don’t know about all the words we use in worship, who don’t even know where they are with God, in the end. The usher is expected to usher them in with the same love and mercy and compassion that took the Lord to a cross and out of an empty tomb for the whole world.

Now, one of the duties of those ushers, was when we got to speaking the Lord’s Prayer towards the end of the worship, one of them would have to make their way up the stairs to just below the bell-tower, and with each phrase of the prayer, they would pull the rope that rang the bells. Granted, for those of us who had put in our fair share of years speaking that prayer from the exact same spot in the exact same pew every single Sunday morning since birth, we probably envisioned the bells tolling signified our words being lifted up to God. But I like to think that maybe an usher like Gene may have had a different idea: that maybe the bells tolling, were meant to remind our neighbors that we were praying for them, too. That no matter the circumstances of the houses around, we believed this God was “Our Father” to us all. That no matter what had happened in the past, we were going to pray not just for the daily bread for those in the pews, but for the needed physical and spiritual sustenance for those beyond the walls. Regardless of the church affiliation, we would pray for a glimpse of the very paradise of God with all its bountiful love and grace and mercy and compassion and joy be for the long-standing members and for those who aren’t so sure about church building anything. Maybe Gene had a different idea of what the bells were for, in the end. That maybe they beautifully embodied the words of the

Gospel: that the often whispered prayers be shouted from the rooftops, to ensure that everyone hears about the God who will never ever give up on you.

Of course, Gene would also be the one to tell you that the Gospel proclamation was not meant to stop with the preacher up-front, or even the hospitable usher by the entrance doors, but for all children of God; for all of us to be blessed with the conviction that the words that are preached, the grace that is extended when you first walk in, the prayer lifted up from the pews to the rooftops and beyond, it is all actually real. And that we can be so convinced about their holy impact, that we cannot help but share it with the neighborhood and beyond: that nothing will ever happen in this life to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. So, for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!