

What's Your Story?
Jenny Tammera
Psalm 98, Luke 21:5-19
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If you were here back in August, you'll remember that we took two weeks on a special series called "What's Your Story?" On two different Sundays, we heard personal testimonies from members of our congregation, and I promised you then that it would be something we would do again because sharing and listening to testimonies is important. Each week in worship we hear the good news proclaimed to us – that God is love, and Christ has come to set us free from death and the things that lead to death, and Christ will come again bringing with him a world made new. We believe these things to be true because Scripture tells us that they are true, but also because God confirms that they're true through our personal experiences. We know God is love because we have experienced it and been changed by it. We know that Jesus sets us free from shame, and guilt, and self-destructive habits because we have experienced that freedom. We know that Jesus's words about life and how to live it are true, because we have tested them and found that his way is best.

In both of our Scripture readings this morning, giving testimony is a theme. The Psalmist *is* giving a testimony, bearing witness to God's nature and acts, and in the Gospel passage, Jesus talks about how the difficulties and challenges that the disciples will experience in a world that is opposed to Jesus and his reign will become opportunities to testify about their faith and God's truth. This morning, another one of Lakewood's newer and younger members, is going to share about how Jesus's words have been proven true in her life. If you haven't met her, you've probably seen her. She is, literally, one of Lakewood's most colorful members. This is Jenny Tammera.

We Give Thanks; God Gives Grace

I was saved in 2008. I was baptized by a non-denominational church right after graduating high school in 2010. When I started going to that particular church, I was told that I needed to choose a life-verse from the Bible when I was baptized. What they meant by life-verse was a scripture that speaks to you and guides you on God's intended path for that season of your life. As you grow with God, your life-verse may change. Since 2008, I have considered my life-verse to be Philippians 4:13: **"I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."** I'm human, and *spoiler alert*, humans make mistakes. And, like most humans, I've dealt with the consequences of my mistakes for a very long time. And, through all the things I went through in life, God gave me the strength to keep going.

I do a couple of Bible study groups through LPC, and most of my fellow bible studiers will tell you that I try to be an open book about my faith walk. I share the things God's brought me through with others in order to glorify God and to point others to Jesus the Christ who gives all of us strength. I have bipolar type 1 disorder and a smattering of other mental health issues that I struggle with. I've lost some amazing family members over the years. The loss that hit me the hardest was when my brother Frankie passed away in a car accident in 2015. I've lived in 5 different US States and 1 Vietnamese province; I used moving and starting over as an escape route. Running away when things went sour was how I coped with my brother's death for the first 4 years.

I made strings of bad choices over my 31 years with consequences that included living in my car and a homeless shelter, being hospitalized for psychiatric reasons over 10 times, living in a battered women's shelter, losing relationships with a myriad of friends and family members, too many bad romantic

relationships, tons of somewhat-serious medical issues, thousands of dollars of medical debt, being kicked out of 2 different colleges for mental health issues (don't worry, I eventually graduated), and a varied array of job occupations including teaching middle school English, cleaning hotel rooms, and scooping ice cream in "Santa's Barn" at an amusement park. Over and over and over again, I put myself in arduous circumstances, and God kept giving me the strength to overcome them.

Over the past 3 and a half years, another life-verse has become increasingly prominent in my life. Romans 8:28. The most common translations usually sound something like this: **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose"**. But the translation of Romans 8:28 that I cling to the most and repeat to myself when everything seems to be falling apart is, **"God never wastes a hurt."** Because all of the things in life that have hurt me, that make me feel like I've had the wind knocked out of me, that cause me pain that I think I'll never recover from are things that God can and *will* use. He doesn't cause the pain, but He doesn't waste it either. And when it feels like life has just exploded, God will take each piece of charred rubble and every last gray ash and turn them into beautiful things. He doesn't waste any of the hurt we feel. Ever.

If there is any time of year where I have experienced that the most, it's Thanksgiving. Last year in 2021, I had a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner here at LPC. There were all kinds of Thanksgiving dishes, smiling faces, great conversations, and warm hugs from welcoming people. Last year Thanksgiving felt like Thanksgiving, ya know what I mean? Thanksgiving-y Thanksgivings feel like warm fuzzies, full bellies, gratefulness, smiles, and love... with a hint of maybe pumpkins. That LPC Thanksgiving-y Thanksgiving last year was an amazing gift to me because a few of my Thanksgivings haven't had a ton of warm fuzzies as an adult. Some of my not-so-great Thanksgivings taught me more than others, but God used every single one of them in some way, shape, or form to make me more and more thankful each successive year.

In autumn 2013, I was living in a Pennsylvania homeless shelter. I hadn't been at the shelter very long when Thanksgiving hit, so I didn't really know anyone there yet. My Thanksgiving that year was not in a loving environment with a ton of family smiling at me and asking me to sit by them. We didn't go around the room and list our gratefuls. There were no table centerpieces or painted hand-turkey placemats. There was Thanksgiving dinner, but somehow the lukewarm styrofoam lunch trays with turkey, mashed potatoes, and green beans saran-wrapped together wasn't quite as Thanksgiving-y as I was used to. Don't get me wrong, I was very grateful to be there and to the church that volunteered to feed us. But it was a weird Thanksgiving for me. I felt out-of-place and invisible. I believed in Jesus, and I knew God was with me... somewhere. I just couldn't see Jesus in any of it. And God still used that.

I had a lot of hurt in my heart then. I ended up living in that homeless shelter for Thanksgiving and the rest of that winter. I felt so defeated when I first got there. I'd messed up my life so badly by age 22 that I didn't want to keep trying. I was depressed, ashamed, overwhelmed by guilt, embarrassed, and so angry at myself. I didn't see any way forward. I looked for Jesus after that. I looked all around me at the church-people in my life, at the leaders of my college, and at my friends. I didn't see Jesus. I saw myself branded with a scarlet letter feeling overwhelmingly ashamed and judged and guilty. And God didn't waste any of that hurt.

When I finally looked up from my own pity-party, that's when I found Jesus again. He wasn't in my church-people or the shelter volunteers. He was right there with me, in my homeless shelter. When I finally looked up, I realized the other homeless people were showing me Jesus. They were normal people. Just like me. For some reason, I had homelessness built up in my head like a disease based on judgemental stereotypes. I thought that homeless people were crazy or on drugs or just there because they made bad financial

decisions. But, when I lived there, they were just normal people. People who ended up in my homeless shelter for so many different reasons: house fires, floods, medical debt, illness, injury, getting laid off or fired, divorce, death of the family members they lived with, car accidents, and the list goes on. People who were just released from jails, hospitals, psych wards, and rehabs with no place else to go. People down on their luck. And that's how God used that hurt.

God used that hurt to open my mind and to open my heart. My shelter friends were humans. Completely human, just like me. We had jobs and cars and hobbies. We liked doing puzzles, and worked as cashiers, and waiters. We went to church in fancy clothes that were donated to our shelter. The ladies in my dorm went out of their way to make each other smile. For example, when particularly bright rainbow clothes were donated to the shelter while I was at work one day, the other ladies snatched them up quickly and saved them aside for me when I got home that night. We helped each other. We played board games. We did school work on the shelter's computer and had movie nights and popcorn in the day-room. We cared for each other in so many little ways that made a big difference. My shelter friends showed me Jesus in ways I'd never understood and in places I'd never thought to look. That's what God taught me Thanksgiving 2013 in the homeless shelter. And that's how God used that hurt.

In November of a previous year, 2006, my Grandma Kucher was battling lung cancer, living with us, and was not doing well. So, instead of all the rigamarole that comes with hosting Thanksgiving, our family decided to have our holiday dinner at a restaurant (for the first time that I can remember). Grandma Kucher was sunshine, smiles, and laughter in human form. Even the week that she lost her fight with cancer, she hid her pain just to keep sharing her magic rays of light and life with her kids and grandkids. The day before Thanksgiving, she went back into the hospital, and never came home. For Thanksgiving dinner that year, we sat at the restaurant with an empty seat where Grandma should have been. But God used that Thanksgiving too. All of it. All of the sadness and loss and grief. All of the disappointment, bewilderment, and anger. God never wastes a hurt.

God used that hurt to teach me how to handle loss and grief and how to handle empty chairs at holiday tables. God used that hurt to prepare me for my first Thanksgiving without my brother Frankie. God used that hurt to help me guide family and friends facing empty chairs at their own holiday tables. I started going to Christian Grief-Share meetings in Florida soon after my brother passed. Then God used my experience from Grief-Share to have me co-lead a chapter of the National Depression Bipolar Support Alliance shortly after I moved to Kansas. Each holiday season while I lived in Kansas, we hosted special meetings for people like me who were coping with the loss of loved ones on top of dealing with their own mental health battles. Instead of focusing on what was going wrong in my life, God shifted my focus to His grace and redemption. There's no single thing that can happen to you that God can't redeem. With God, there's always redemption; with God, there's always hope.

My understanding of these scriptures we read from Luke is God promises that despite suffering and difficulty, it doesn't change God. It doesn't change His promises for us. It doesn't change His ability to care for us. It doesn't change His love for us. And that's what we can always be thankful for. That God doesn't change. You don't have to be thankful for your suffering. In fact, it would be really hard and kinda weird to be thankful for all the hurt. But, we *can* be thankful for how God uses it. Thankful for how God never wastes *any* hurt.

The other scripture we read for today's service was Psalm 98. In The Passion Translation, Psalms 98:1,4-6 says, **"Go ahead—sing your brand-new song to the Lord! He is famous for his miracles and marvels, for he is victorious through his mighty power and holy strength. So go ahead, everyone, and shout out your**

praises with joy! Break out of the box and let loose with the most joyous sound of praise! Sing your melody of praise to the Lord and make music like never before! Blow those trumpets and shofars! Shout with joyous triumph before the King!"

It's easy to imagine singing or reading this psalm when you're happy, when things are good, and when you're naturally feeling grateful to God. It's not too hard to think of happiness and thanking God at Thanksgiving. But I challenge you to read or sing this psalm out loud. And not just on your best days, but every day. Shout this thankful praise on the good days, the most mundane days, on the bad days, and on the days that hurt so deep that you feel like you'll never get through them. Shout with joy through the hurt even before God uses that hurt. Even before God brings the beauty. Shout with joy anyway because you know the beauty is coming.