



THE FOOTPATH

The monthly newsletter of

Followers of Christ Lutheran Church

A Congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Dear Followers of Christ,

The saying, “You’re just spinning your wheels,” is a negative one. The expression can either be literal; you spin your wheels in a snow bank and end up stuck. Or more often, the expression “spinning your wheels” is used to describe an unproductive situation despite one’s best efforts. When you study hard for a test in school, but only end up more frustrated and confused, it’s like you’re spinning your wheels. When you can’t repair a broken kitchen appliance or mend a relationship – try as you might to use the right tools for the job, or to say the right thing to the person who’s hurt – you’re “spinning your wheels,” so to speak.

Recently, I competed in a ski race in northern Wisconsin. I lost my balance and fell a few times on the hilly racecourse. But after each fall, I could manage to pick myself up again. I didn’t need any help getting back up on my skis – no “spinning my wheels” there.

Driving out of the parking lot of the condo where we were staying during the race was a different story, however. It had snowed a few inches the night before. Our parking spot was on a gradual hillside. I knew that if I backed the car straight back without stopping, I could reach the main driveway, and then take that to the top of the hill. At the top of the hill stood the condo. I wanted to park the car as close as possible to load. I could park the car temporarily right in front of the condo. That at least was the plan.

From my parking space down the hill, I backed up all the way to the main driveway. I didn’t want to stop and get stuck. But eventually I did have to stop and shift the car from reverse to drive. And I had to turn the wheel to point the car uphill, in the direction I wanted to go.

Once I had stopped, I didn’t have the momentum or the traction to make it up the driveway. I pushed the accelerator ever so slightly; I didn’t want my wheels to spin. Yet they spun anyway. And the car drifted to the side and into deeper snow.

To gain traction under the tires, I tried packing cardboard and sprinkling cool sandy ashes from the fireplace. It worked for my friend’s car when he’d gotten stuck. We had been able to push him out. But it wasn’t working for me. The car would inch forward and then backward – one step forward, two steps back – and the tires soon began spinning again. It was useless.

On the 6th of this month, we will be observing Ash Wednesday. The season of Lent will begin that day. We’ll hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We’ll be reminded of what it is to be human, fallen, “spinning our wheels,” captive to sin and unable to free ourselves. We can’t free ourselves from our human limitations and our sin and our death. We can’t use the ash on our foreheads to gain traction and free ourselves.

Only Christ can do that. Only Christ can free us, and has done so, in his cross and resurrection.

There’s a reason that we trace the ashes in the shape of a cross on each other’s foreheads, after all. Though we are all dust, and though we are all bound by death, only Christ’s death on the cross has the power to free us.

On the cross, Christ died forgiving us of our sin against him and his Father. And Christ’s resurrection from the dead proves that he meant what he said. He meant that forgiveness for us; he meant that we’d be free from sin and death. In his own resurrection from the dead, Christ shows us the life with God he meant for us, a life no longer bound by death and reduced to a pile of ashes.

It was useless to spin my tires in the snow. Not even my effort to use cardboard and ashes was working to pull myself out. No, it took a wise and helpful gentleman in a suburban with a trailer hitch and a tow rope to pull me out – and to see to it that I drove all the way to the bottom of the driveway, down to road where I could turn around, before I could gain the momentum and traction needed to make it to the top.

Christ be with you this Lent –
Pastor Brad