

**Small Talk – August 20 2021**  
**By Michael Small**

I was working at the church yesterday afternoon, Marlys was working on the bulletin. We heard a number of vehicles with sirens go by – Cass County Sheriff vehicles hauling boats. About thirty-minutes later my phone rang. It was from Cass County dispatch – could I go to the scene of a drowning and be present with the family.

The extended family who were in the middle of a week-long vacation – parents, grandparents, siblings, children, and grandchildren – a time on the lake for fun and relaxation. They came to the same place four times each summer. Fun on the lake and in the sun on a warm summer day. In a moment that all changed with the tragic disappearance and drowning of the father. Life that is so precious, deeply valued, and so fragile – was gone in a moment. As a Cass County Chaplain, I was called to be present with the family with listening, prayer, and quiet conversation. Now the family has the task of putting the pieces back together as they grieve and move on and head back home minus a father.

We who are permanent or seasonal residences in northern Minnesota live here because of the lakes, the environment, the pleasure of fishing, hunting, even swimming in the fresh waters of these wondrous lakes. It is too easy to forget that these beautiful lakes can also be very unforgiving. We think we are prepared or ready for any event. But then there is a sudden, unexpected fall into the lake, a boat that quickly moves from our location, isolation, weariness, tired muscles without a can lead to a quick and unforgiving death.

Growing up in Toledo OH my father was an officer in the United States Coast Guard. He inspected the Great Lakes ships that carried coal and iron ore during the winter while they were docked. He would check out their life jackets, making sure they were seaworthy. If they had expired, he would rip them up with his ice pick. He would check the integrity of their hulls. And on occasion, he would be on-board when search and rescue boats would find the body of one who had drowned.

Even though we kids were all certified (from the YMCA) good swimmers, when swimming in the lakes it was mandatory that we had our big orange life jacket on. We would complain, but there was no compromise. When in a fishing boat, the same rules applied. Dad might be flexible if were walking on the shore or only up to our knees. It was annoying, but it saved lives.

As I get older, for myself, I think a best strategy, is to wear a PFD (Personal Floatation Device) or life jacket. They are smaller, more comfortable, and they save lives – even for strong swimmers.

Let's all enjoy the summer, the lakes of northern Minnesota. But let us all model good and safe behavior by wearing PFD's while on and in the water. And you know, my Dad would be smiling right now saying, "Finally, after 72 years – he gets it!"

In the spirit and agape love of Jesus, Michael

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