

September 29, 2009

The Way It Looks from Here **The Heart of the Decision: Doing a Peculiarly Lutheran Thing**

Dear Partners in Ministry,

In my e-letter last month following decisions by the Churchwide Assembly, I began by saying "Take a deep breath."

Many have done just that. And many have encouraged others to do the same. It's also clear that in between those deep breaths, lots of conversation is going on!

As I have talked with pastors and others around the synod, I have been proud of the way so many of you are giving leadership these days—patient, caring, listening, steady leadership. Often it has been hard as you have listened to some members deeply troubled by these recent decisions. I am grateful for your leadership.

Last week you received an e-letter from Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson sharing some thoughts on the ongoing life of the church. I, too, had been formulating some thoughts about how I've seen things unfolding here. I want to reflect on three streams of conversation in particular. As I've mulled and written, it's gotten even longer than normal (and normal is long enough!). So I'm going to send three e-letters over the next several days, this and two more. And my reflections are going to be around these three streams that are often at the heart of the conversations that arise among people troubled by this decision:

- **Today:** The Heart of the Decision: Doing a Peculiarly Lutheran Thing
- **Wednesday:** Scripture as Authority: Can't the Bible Just Settle This?
- **Thursday:** Registering Dissent

The Heart of the Decision: Doing a Peculiarly Lutheran Thing

Much of Christendom and virtually all secular media understand the church as an organization. Were that so, the decisions about organizational structure would be decisions of ultimate importance. For Lutherans the church is the work of the Holy Spirit that (as we learned in the explanation to Third Article in Luther's Small Catechism) "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth." That, and the central understanding of God's claiming us by grace alone, frees us from getting all matters exactly right ourselves, frees us to live with ambiguity, paradox, curiosity, and open-ended questions ripe for explanation. It is a gift we have as Lutherans and one that positions us well for living in this complex world.

Lutheran theology delights in paradox and ambiguity, holding seemingly contradictory truths side-by-side. I've been in several conversations among Lutherans and Catholics and have come to learn that one of the most baffling of Lutheran concepts is one we hold dear: *simul justus et peccator*. We are simultaneously saint and sinner, justified and fallen. In my synod assembly report, I spoke of the Madison Agreement of 1912 that settled the raging fights of the election controversy among Norwegian Lutherans in this county by agreeing that two contradictory explanations of God's work of salvation could exist side-by-side in the same church. Because we know the church to be given life and shape by the Spirit, defined only by the presence of the Word being preached and the Sacraments administered, much of the rest of the church's life is lived in a spectrum of gray, not in black and white.

The decisions of the recent churchwide assembly need to be understood in this way. The public perception, reinforced by some media, suggests that a toggle switch got thrown from one side to the other, that we taught and believed one thing and now we teach and believe the opposite. That is not what happened. A close examination of the decisions makes that clear. Our challenge is that this takes more understanding and explanation than that for which most of us have patience. But such a challenge presents us with an opportunity to teach and grow in faith.

The study materials prepared to guide the church through this process and the adopted social statement are, when it comes to homosexuality, *descriptive*, not *proscriptive*. They describe differing understandings held by people in this church, and they describe the biblical and theological thought behind those positions. Then comes the peculiarly Lutheran thing: the adopted proposals call us to respect that these contradictory positions can be held by people of clear conscience and biblical attentiveness (my words). Not simply tolerated but respected, and held together in a way that the polity and practices of this church will make room for both. As difficult as that might be, we'll "bear one another's burdens" and find a way to respect each others' bound conscience.

And that's what the ministry proposals do. They open the polices of this church for congregations to be able to call those most gifted for ministry in their context-- including gay and lesbian clergy whose relationships meet a standard every bit as faithful and committed as married heterosexual clergy.

But it *also* regards as a faithful place to stand those congregations that believe this is not a faithful and appropriate response.

So what does this mean?

Can these inherently contradictory positions exist side-by-side? I believe so. If we are The-Church-of-the-Absolutely-Final-Word-on-Homosexuality, well, then such positions probably cannot. But we are the church of Jesus Christ. The God we meet in Jesus Christ is our absolute. That's non-negotiable. And as Lutherans, we're not only anchored in Christ, but in grace alone, which means none of our efforts—

including getting particular teachings right—determines whether we're right with God or not. Shot through with imperfection and sinful to our very bone, we throw ourselves into the hands of God's grace. That's our core.

And then we set about being the people God calls us to be, giving it our best shot.

So we move out in mission.

The undercurrent of these decisions is mission. That's unlike much of the civil debate that parallels all this and centers on individual rights. God sends us into the world to care for one another and for the world. These proposals have at their core the opening of possibilities for strengthened mission:

- If congregations believe they can minister best to gay and lesbian people in their communities by offering recognition and support to couples finding lifelong love and companionship in each other, they may do that.
- If some congregations seeking to call a pastor identify an individual in such a relationship who has the gifts to strengthen the mission to which God calls them, they may call that person as pastor of their congregation.
- If other congregations are drawn to be present in mission with different convictions on these matters, they are supported in their work as well.
- No congregation's ministry suffers from this decision, but some congregations will now have new possibilities opened to them.

So can we now focus on the work God calls us to do... together? It's time!

For most of the years of the ELCA's existence—and specifically since 2001 and culminating last month—this church has wrestled with ministry policies in study groups of all kinds, forums, congregational meetings, narthex and parking lot conversations, council meetings, websites and blogs, conference and synod and churchwide assemblies. For much of that time a common refrain has been "Can't we spend this energy talking about the mission in the world God calls us to?!" But these issues weren't to be ignored. They were and are important, so the wrestling continued. The discussions have sometimes been angry, more often civil, usually grounded in prayer and common purpose for the life of this church. I believe we can be proud of how we have undertaken these discussions.

Now we have made decisions, decisions that I believe respect the integrity and faithfulness of people who disagree. Decisions don't change minds...but the decision has been made. The differences may continue to divide some of us sharply. Some who disagree will nevertheless choose to cling to those common convictions that unite us as Lutherans and are the core from which we draw strength. Others may choose to find active ways to dissent or to leave. (More on the issue of dissent in part three of this trilogy.) But with those actions completed, we are freed to choose to thrust ourselves into God's work in the world.

Leading into God's mission in the world

The church has decided, and from this point forward, I claim the decisions of the church. I will lead this part of our church into living out these policies, which have sought to respect the different views held by its members. I will continue to seek to be the pastor of all in this synod. I will continue to respect your strong convictions. I will listen. I will pray with all of you who agree and disagree.

Some of you are in congregations where members are so deeply disturbed they choose to sever ties. You encourage them to stay, but if remaining in membership is such an overwhelmingly negative matter, you give them assurance that the body of Christ is bigger than a single congregation or single denomination and wish them godspeed. And you focus on the mission God has given to you to do in your place.

Similarly, for us as church together, I believe it's time for us to move forward and outward. I don't believe we can do that by living in complaint, rancor, and negativity. If the decisions made are such a stumbling block that dominates congregational energy, aggravates fellowship, and takes all joy from giving wholeheartedly to the work we do together, then in some cases separation may happen—I might even say that if this is the only way a congregation can return to an energetically positive attitude towards its work beyond the congregation, maybe it needs to happen for mission in the world to once again be put center stage.

I will regret if such a thing unfolds with any congregation of this synod. But, if it should, I will seek to partner in that decision in a way that itself is respectful, recognizing that the unity of Christ alone can still be present in differing organizational settings, just as we have learned ecumenically. To any congregations where that may happen, I will support you, pray for you, and remember you. The unity of Christ will be present in both our bodies and living separately will allow us to move beyond arguing into the important work God calls us to do.

The decisions we made arose out of prayer and discernment of God's leading. I choose to believe that the life of the church draws its breath from the Spirit, and the Spirit will breathe new life and new possibilities out of these decisions. This is the Lord's church, and the Lord has work for us to do.

Let's have at it.

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