

## **2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly**

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Some amazing things have occurred in Minneapolis, Minnesota this week, and most of us here in Ohio have been pretty much oblivious to it all. I'm talking about the ELCA's Churchwide Assembly, which opened with worship on Monday and will bring down the gavel with a Closing Order for Adjournment right about Noon today. During the course of this week, we heard from ecumenical partners in the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church, and now, with the latest vote from our 11<sup>th</sup> Churchwide Assembly since our forming in 1987, we have ratified an agreement on full communion with the United Methodist Church. This agreement continues the pattern of acknowledging that our ecumenical partners do not have to be wrong in order for us to be right. Each of us sees an essential aspect of the truth of the gospel that adds to the health of the church and to the faithfulness with which we're all trying to live Christian lives. As Lutherans we continue to insist that all of us say YES to the priority and preeminence of God's grace as the cornerstone and foundation of all things Christian; but we are also instructed by the power of faithful witness that these other historic traditions have exhibited over the years.

The delay with Methodists has related to our concern that there was no one person or office that could speak with authority for the Methodist Church in terms of expressing consensus or insuring compliance at the local level. For instance, we could begin a conversation with the Chapel, or mega-churches like Saddleback or Willowcreek, but they speak only for themselves. They are stand alone churches. Lutheran congregations stand together for the sake of effectiveness in mission and efficiencies in ministry. Some churches have highly developed and meticulously defined bureaucracies that can speak with authority for their church and congregations, like the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. We see that symbolically present with Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Communion. Lutherans, and many other Protestants, have traditions that help to define who we are, like the Confessional documents in the Book of Concord for Lutherans, or Calvin's Institutes for churches in the Reformed tradition. Protestants in general have nothing in common, except that we're not Catholics. So, conversations are important in determining whether, in what ways, and to what degree we can become partners in proclaiming the gospel and pursuing the work of the kingdom through the life of the church. Affirming full communion is as far as Lutherans can go, and by a vote of 951 to 58, a super-majority of 95%, this is exactly what we did on Thursday.

Of course, for those who weren't paying attention quite as well as I haven't been, you may have heard about the news coming out of Minneapolis that had to do with matters pertaining to human sexuality, gender identity, and ministry policies in the ELCA. While many of us haven't been following it, for most of the summer a controversy has been

simmering, having to do with the recommendations coming out of the ELCA's *Studies in Sexuality Task Force*. Their work produced three basic recommendations: first, a Social Statement and Study Document entitled *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*; second, a recommendation that no changes be made to our code of conduct for rostered leaders; and third, the recommendation of a *local option* for matters of discipline related to gender identity, where local synod bishops would be given greater discretion in terms of enforcing present ELCA policies. This was regarded by some as the "middle ground" between advocates for change and defenders of tradition. The short version for explaining these recommendations were summed up as (1) "no changes" to ELCA ministry policies, and (2) the creation of a "local option" for Synods that didn't want to enforce a policy they wanted changed. The primary loser in this solution was the ELCA, since it was admitting and embracing the acknowledgement that it couldn't enforce its own policies in matters where significant disagreement seemed irresolvable.

On Friday, it became clear that what the Task Force thought they had found was not this elusive *middle ground*, but something more like sand, and shifting sand at that. Amendments from the floor of the Churchwide Assembly made minor changes to the *Statement on Sexuality*, which was followed by a vote rejecting the original proposal not to change our code of conduct for rostered leaders, and then amending the ministry policy proposal and the code of conduct. While the concept of creating a *local option* will still function, it is now for Synods that don't want to implement the new ministry policy, rather than for those who didn't want to enforce the old policy. While there are still many particulars to resolve, the decision of democracy-in-action at the Churchwide Assembly was to no longer require that rostered leaders who are gay or lesbian remain celibate in order to maintain their status as rostered leaders in good standing.

This has been a difficult issue for many denominations, especially for Lutherans, because advocates for change have required that we relegate Scripture and tradition to a back burner in determining our stand on matters of gender identity and rostered ministry. On the other hand, all have been forced to recognize that there have been seismic shifts in our wider culture around this issue, with an emerging set of precedents in the area of civil rights law requiring radical adjustments in the workplace, on the public square, and throughout the mainstream of western culture. As I reflect on these matters a day after these votes were taken and decisions made, I find it somewhat ironic that after harboring suspicions about Methodists for decades that national bureaucratic umbrellas couldn't secure compliance at the local level, it turns out that neither can we! It's hard to predict what the fallout of this year's churchwide assembly will be; but it sets the stage for listening to the Scriptural texts selected for this the twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.

Our First Lesson from Joshua 24 recounts an ancient tradition in Israel called the annual ceremony of covenant renewal, when the tribes would gather at Shechem to reaffirm God's covenant, which turned a group of disparate tribes who once were no people into God's people. Being God's people was no simple matter. The challenges were many in

terms of adjusting to their new location and their new identity. They would need to employ the skills they learned in the wilderness, namely, trusting God every day for their daily bread, with their need for guidance, for their moorings in life. “Revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness – in other words, with all your heart, in all you do. Put away the gods your ancestors served before they became God’s people. Choose this day whom you will serve, whether it’s the gods your ancestors served before God made them His people, or the gods folks serve in the land where you’re now living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” Where will we find the guidance we need and the moorings we’re looking for in navigating through the challenges we face in everyday life? Joshua points not to how we once lived, or how folks around us live, but to the covenant God made with us when God made us His people.

Paul has some pretty interesting language to describe the challenges of daily life: “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God every day. For our struggle is not just against enemies of flesh and blood, but against powerful rulers, cosmic powers, and spiritual forces in the highest places.” It’s hard being God’s people. Oh, it seems great during those miraculous high points when it is clearly God’s hand laying hold of us and leading us from a place of desperation to a land of hope and promise. But once we’re delivered, what’s next? It’s not heavenly bliss, but the call of discipleship in the trenches of daily life right here on planet Earth. That’s what Paul is talking about with our Second Lesson. Stand up straight. Gird yourself with the belt of truth. Put on the breastplate of righteousness. As for shoes, walk in the gospel of peace. Take the shield of faith. Put on the helmet of salvation, equipped with the sword of the Spirit and the Word of God.” And don’t forget to brush your teeth before you head out the door to face the day! It’s a jungle out there! Trust the Lord. Be ready for battle. Paul gives us a pretty animated vision of the challenges we face in the here and now. We are to be clothed with truth, righteousness, faith and peace – gifts of the Spirit all.

Jesus placed the focus of his animated sense of the Spirit’s presence in the mystery of Holy Communion. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.” His point here is not to advocate a new cannibalism, but to proclaim himself as the key to the new life we seek, the true life God gives with the gift of the new covenant that opens the gates of the kingdom to all who believe in Jesus as the Christ, God’s Son, our Savior. “Because of this many disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the Twelve, “Do you also wish to go away? Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” These words remind me of the exchange Jesus had with the Twelve in the Upper Room, when Jesus announced that he had somewhere to go, and more, the disciples had knowledge of the destination and some sense of the directions, too. Thomas stood up and said what all were thinking, “Lord, we don’t have the slightest idea where you’re going. How could we possibly know the way?” Jesus then responds with a classic: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” That’s what Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel. That’s what Jesus has been saying all month long as we’ve been following the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel.

It can seem at times that we stand alone before Jesus as he addresses us each individually with his invitation to receive the life he offers; but the truth is that we do not stand alone. Rather, we stand together. Community is the key. The new covenant, which has been established through the blood of Christ, and the community of disciples, which has become the body of Christ through the gift of the Spirit: these set the stage for the salvation God offers, for the life that is ours with the mission we've embraced to live God's love through the ministry of the church. Community is the key. It is the key in the Joshua text, where each of the twelve tribes is challenged to reaffirm their being a part of the community God created through the miracle of the Exodus and the gift of the Covenant. It is the key in all that Paul proclaims. For Paul was the first, and certainly the most visionary, in seeing that the new communities called into being through the proclamation of the gospel were nothing less than actual representations of the body of Christ. Community is the key to the new life God gives through Christ.

As I have looked through the various news releases coming out of the Churchwide Assembly, I have found that lifting up the community that is ours in Christ has been a key to Bishop Mark Hanson's prayerful appeals following the crucial votes at the Churchwide Assembly. In addressing the church gathered in Minneapolis, and present throughout the ELCA, he cites Colossians 3 in asking that we "bear with one another ... and forgive each other.... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts ... remembering again and again that we are called into the one body." That one body is the body of Christ, which we know as the Church. This community is the key to God's promise of life and God's call to live it. For the life God gives is present in this community we share; and this community is a gift, God's gift, not something we have created, but a gift that is ours to receive, to maintain, and to celebrate, humbly and gratefully ... in Jesus' Name. Amen