

## Bishop's Report Synod Assembly 2014

Isaiah 35

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
‘Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you.’

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

This has long been a favorite text of mine. It appears during Advent in the lectionary and also happens to be the Old Testament text for the day of St. Luke the Evangelist. In either case it signals a time of awakening, a reversal of fortunes for the people of God, a time of expectation.

What is most interesting is that the new vision employs the gifts and talents of those who have almost given up as well as those who have been given up on by others. It provides the core of what I consider to be the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I think it is the signature text for the church of today. It calls us to stop lamenting and to stop living in the past. It says to us also that we are the fragile but powerful vessels through whom God continues to bring life to the world. It signals a time of awakening for those who have fallen asleep.

I often find myself with the words of the old John Denver song running through my head, *“what a friend we have in time, gives us children, makes us wine, tells us what to take and leave behind”*. As I look at the church today I believe it is a matter of discerning what it is we take and what it is we leave behind in order to be disciples in today's world.

What to leave behind . . . .

It should be apparent that the days of assumed Christianity in this country are gone. When I was growing up most of my neighbors looked a lot like me and it was not so matter a much of whether they went to church, but of which church they belonged to, even if participation was marginal. Statistics prove that we are becoming increasingly unchurched. The Bishop's Academy this past January centered almost exclusively on the topic of the nuns, those who if asked to name their religious affiliation say simply “nun”. Interestingly the faith questions often remain prominent in the hearts and minds of those who have long abandoned religious institutions. It is a generation often eager to be engaged in faith

questions, a generation not necessarily antithetical, but indifferent and absent from the church that we now know.

If there's one frustration I have about the church today, it is that so much of our church life is spent trying to preserve the remnant of what has been rather than engage the curiosity of those hungry for God.

I applaud the efforts in Racine and now in the northwest corridor of Milwaukee as they begin to try to work cooperatively. I fear that sometimes it is desperation which finally drives us together. I think for the most part we still embrace a rigid congregationalism in this country and while congregations are usually the important cells of ministry, preservation rather than proclamation too often rules the day. I think it is imperative that churches begin to work together before reaching the point of desperation.

At the same time the words of Isaiah remind us that renewal for Old Testament Israel began by employing the gifts of the scattered remnant. I sincerely believe that even in a beleaguered congregation lie the dreams of a new reality. I have seen too many people who have lived through major changes in the church and the world discounted and diminished as the church struggles to be more missional. I think the trick lies in leaving behind the trappings of the institution, obsession with buildings, preservation of ineffective hierarchy, without also surrendering the important witness of those who have gone before us.

What to take . . .

I am proud to be a Lutheran. For me it goes far beyond the embrace of the quaint little traditions of my European ancestors or of our Nordic tendency toward self-effacing piety. For me being a Lutheran has everything to do with embracing the theology of the cross instead of a theology of glory. Being a Lutheran acknowledges that grace is revealed not in the privilege offered to a few but in God's benevolent brooding, forgiving nature toward the whole creation.

Thus to be a Lutheran means that one's life of faith can never be separated from the care of neighbor or the pursuit of justice. Being a Lutheran acknowledges that God's heart is always seeking out the poor and the disenfranchised whomever they may be, and furthermore, is always seeking to understand the poor and disenfranchised as neighbor rather than as simply the object or recipients of the benevolence of others.

The Greater Milwaukee Synod has been particularly blessed by the relationships with our global companion synods. On a daily basis they remind us the proclamation of the Gospel is never separate from feeding hungry people or from seeking justice in the world around us.

This past year one of the most interesting things was the participation in the distribution of money gained from the sale of Good Shepherd and St. Andrews Lutheran Churches in Waukesha. More than the distribution of money itself, I think it did begin to name the things that we are passionate about in this synod and in the world around us.

Hunger issues matter in this world, but feeding hungry people goes far beyond simply packing food packages or serving at food pantries, although those are important places where people often begin the conversation around food justice. Ultimately they lead us to the larger arena that deals with human dignity and the issues of justice surrounding the issue of hunger. They also raise force us the need to work toward sustainability rather than dependence. I am proud that the ELCA has been willing to enter those arenas.

The distribution of the Good Shepherd money also did raise up the importance of being a global church. If there's one thing which consistently seems to awaken discipleship it is discovering the depth and breadth of the global church and the importance of learning from our neighbors as we walk together.

If there is anything that is a little disappointing it was that only one of the five grants, the one to start a Latino mission in Waukesha, was the only one of the five which dealt directly with congregational development. I think sometimes we Lutherans are tepid in our invitation to others to become part of the fabric of our congregations. One of the things we have to take along with the willingness to address tough issues, the willingness to live sacrificially, is the notion that being a part of a Lutheran congregation can bring joy and hope and love to the life of others.

I think that the theology of the cross provides the true path for a religious revival in this country. I dare to believe that the ELCA has a message, an authentic message, in the life of the world today. I believe that bold witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and willingness to carry that witness into the broken places with a spirit of proclamation and a heart of justice will be welcomed by a hungry world.