

Keynote
2010 Synod Assembly
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I've been spending a lot of time with I Corinthians this year. As you know, the church at Corinth knew remarkable, roiling turmoil. They found a way of fighting about almost everything—from matters of human sexuality, to lawsuits, to spiritual gifts, to the Lord's Supper, to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You name it and the Corinthians could find a way of fighting about it.

I've particularly spent time with I Corinthians 12-13 where Paul is trying to help the congregation find its way through all of the controversy. In chapter 12 he takes on the conflict over spiritual gifts by providing an image that helps the congregation to see why the diversity of gifts is given not for conflict or to prove one's superiority but as a gift for the sake of the mission of the church. Diversity is necessary for the same reasons that a body has many different parts.

Then in I Corinthians 12:12 he writes:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

He goes on to explore that image with the Corinthians and with us, making the point repeatedly in the following verses and then offers this summary in verse 27:

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Chapter 12 sets the stage for what is known as “The Love Chapter” and is frequently read at weddings.

But Paul did not write this chapter for a wedding, though it is very useful for that purpose. He wrote Chapter 13 to help this conflicted congregation find a way through the controversies, remain one in Christ, and get on with the mission of the church. “This is how this one body of Christ will stay together for the sake of witnessing to the love of Jesus Christ,” he is writing. How will we possibly be able to do that? Love-the greatest spiritual gift that Jesus gives to the church. Faith, hope, love abide. Love. Without love, everything else is but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Love

We love the Church because we love Jesus and the church is His body on earth with him as the Head.

We love the Church because through it we have received the gift of salvation and have been nurtured in the faith.

We love the Church because Jesus tells us in Matthew’s Gospel that His disciples are the light of the world.

The Church.

Christ’s Body.

Entrusted with the message of salvation

The light to a world darkened by despair.

We have structured the synod, this part of the body of Christ, to make Christ known in Northeastern Iowa and to strengthen the witness and service of the whole Church.

It all begins with God's Word and Sacraments, the means/the way that God's grace comes to us. Synod ministries strengthen that essential ministry of the church by providing direct support to congregations and then challenges congregations for even greater witness and service so that we do not turn in on ourselves.

We ask congregations to turn to their neighbors in Conferences for Cooperative Ministries to seek ways of strengthening one another by serving one another and challenging one another. You are aware of the wide range of ministries that take place in our conferences. They include stewardship events, conference Sunday school teacher recognition dinners, rural evangelism events, church council workshops and, this year, Mason City and Upper Iowa River Conferences added a new idea of an event for confirmation students. These were wonderful celebrations filled with energy, joy and faith.

We also provide connections beyond the immediate areas of our congregations and conferences. We gather as a synod assembly to make decisions about ministry and mission. The synod council, staff and boards then seek to faithfully implement those decisions. As a synod we support and develop leaders, focus on mission and network effective ministries. A few examples include:

The work of the Board of Leadership in Ministry supports and develops leaders through Candidacy Committee, colleague groups, compensation, Fall Conference, First Call Theological Education, Life-Long Learning for Lutherans, Living Waters Retreat Centers and SAFE Ministry.

The Board of Ministry in Mission helps us focus on mission through the work of work groups on Care of Creation, Companion Synod, Global Mission, Home Life, Hunger, Aging and Rural Life. Organizations for men, women and youth offer support, encouragement and opportunities for Bible study, witness and service.

Our institutions seek to hand on mission priorities from one generation to the next.

- Outdoor ministries,
- Campus ministries—new exciting partnership at UNI with St. John and Bethlehem expand to young adults in the Cedar Falls area but also at each congregation and college site,
- Colleges,
- Seminaries,
- Lutheran Services in Iowa,
- Barnabus Uplift.

Our part of the Body of Christ and those who are individually members of it are connected to all members of our congregations, synod and churchwide organization through the ELCA. The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Larson will be sharing more with you in a few moments about those ministries.

Obviously, the body goes beyond the ELCA as we join with our full communion partners for the purpose of mission and ministry. These ecumenical agreements are making a difference for real people in the communities of Oelwein, West Union and Greene and have allowed us to explore possibilities of sharing in the work of Lutheran Services in Iowa in new ways with our new partners in ministry.

We love the church. We seek to strengthen the Church because it is

Christ's Body

Entrusted with the message of salvation

Light of the World

We love the church and seek its strength.

That is where the challenges come. We've had a difficult two years. We are still recovering from the raid in Postville, the tornado that hit Parkersburg and tore through the heart of our synod, the floods that will take years yet from which to recover, the horribly violent death of a beloved coach, citizen, family man and person of faith.

Last August our part of the body of Christ made decisions about the possibility of congregational ministries to and with gay and lesbian persons that, as I mentioned in last night's sermon, are embraced by some as decisions for God's justice and mercy while others believe that the decisions caused us to leave important tenants of our faith. God knows what these decisions mean for our witness and service for our part of the Body of Christ and we are in the process of finding that out.

Throughout these past few months, I have frequently thought of a speech that Dr. Kent Knutson gave to Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in July 1971. Dr. Knutson was president of the American Lutheran Church at the time. He was a person of great faith with a strong commitment to the unity of the church. He grew up on a farm in Central Iowa and attended a small country church.

His brief years of service were marked by a time of great change. In 1968, the ALC and LCMS declared altar and pulpit fellowship, allowing for one another's

pastors to preach from their respective pulpits and members to commune at one another's tables. Though both were from the same Lutheran tradition, this was the first time that each other's ministries were recognized.

Then in 1970, the ALC voted to ordain women. This caused an immediate strain in the new relationship and eventually led to LCMS breaking the altar and pulpit fellowship. They questioned the ALC's commitment to scripture and came to the conclusion that the ALC's decision to ordain women was a rejection of scripture as the authoritative source and norm for all matters of faith and life.

Dr. Knutson addressed the LCMS convention the year after the vote to ordain women and two years before LCMS broke the fellowship. In the midst of this turmoil, he chose to address the concerns directly: What does the ALC believe about the Word of God and why did the ALC make the decision to ordain women.

I would like to play a few excerpts from that speech. He addressed the role of scripture and describes the process that was used by the ALC and LCA to consider the change in ordination policies. The excerpts that you hear will include words of introduction and then a cut to when he addresses the change in ministry policies directly. When he says "they," he is referring to the ALC delegates and "you" is directed to the LCMS delegates. Dr. Knutson:

"As a free and sovereign church they made their own decision. They did so out of the conviction that this was not contrary to Scriptures when all the evidence was considered, and they did it believing it was not divisive of fellowship. The Bible is not a book of laws, and the many admonitions to the church in the New Testament must be carefully delineated to understand their impact and application in the life of the church at other times and places. You are a free and sovereign church. You must make your own decision. We will not be offended if you make a different decision, if you

do—based on your conviction of what the Scripture teaches. But we will be sorrowful if it breaks fellowship. The American Lutheran Church can err. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod can err. What shall we do when we both act out of our conviction of what is taught by the Bible? We live together and seek great wisdom. Let us not act hastily in judging one another without listening to one another.”

Following these words he turns to what is essential to the mission of the church in very challenging times:

“We believe God’s grace is great enough for us to live together in the freedom He has granted us.

I come, as an evangelist, to urge you to the great mission of the church. Our real task for this day is to preach the Gospel with such clarity, conviction, and power that a restless world will hear. We live in a troubled time—a time of massive dislocation of social justice, a time of distorted sexuality, a time of growing secularization, which is another name for a growing atheism. God calls us to a task as great as that of the Reformers. This is not a time to engage in the subtleties of theology but a time for the firm proclamation and obedience to the love and grace He has promised us. How great is His grace!

I come as a sinner to testify to His saving grace. This is what we all are—sinners saved by grace. It is necessary for us to say this everywhere to everyone. I do not do this for your sake but for my own, for this is my calling, and I am compelled.”

At this point, he reflects on his election to be president of the ALC which was a somewhat surprising election. By the way, the story goes that when he called his father to share the news of his election, there was a pause at the other end of the line and then these words, “The beans sure got a nice rain last night.”

When he was elected he says that he could only respond spontaneously and from deep within these words from Luther’s catechism came to him that he had learned

at that country church and he shares them with the LCMS convention. Please read together what he shared:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.

He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Dr. Knutson continued:

“This is the faith in which I live and for which I would die. And so would you. Missouri Synod, we love you. We love you with the love of Christ, a love which is not of our making but a gift from Him. We pray for you, that you may do God’s bidding, that your strength may be renewed like the eagle’s, that the Lord Jesus Christ may reign in your lives so that you may be His witnesses to the uttermost parts of the earth. “You are the people of God,” Paul writes in Colossians, “you are the people of God, He loved you and chose you for His own.”

And then he quotes Colossians 3:12-15. We read together these words that he shared to close his remarks:

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

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Light to the World

“For you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

We are the Church—the one thing on this earth that is eternal.

Thanks be to God!