

2011 Assembly Sermon
Bishop Steven L. Ullestad

I'm sure that I've shared with you before that those who call themselves "Happy Danes" gather every year in Tyler, Minnesota at the Danebod Folk School. It's a remarkable gathering of people of Danish heritage that keep Nicholai Grundtvig's understanding of the faith alive. It's an older group—when I attended I was among the youngest. The average age announced was 72 years old and they are a happy lot. They sing and dance in the morning, afternoon and night with educational opportunities scattered throughout the day. After closing worship at 9:30 or 10:00 p.m., they go to the gym for group exercises and you know what, it looks a lot like dancing.

You have probably sung some of Grundtvig's hymns.

"O Day Full of Grace"

- 1 O day full of grace that now we see
appearing on earth's horizon,
bring light from our God that we may be
abundant in joy this season.
God, shine for us now in this dark place;
your name on our hearts emblazon.

- 5 When we on that final journey go
that Christ is for us preparing,
we'll gather in song, our hearts aglow,
all joy of the heavens sharing,
and there we will join God's endless praise,
with angels and saints adoring.

However, what you may not know is that these two verses are in the original version of the hymn:

- 3 Yea, were ev'ry tree endowed with speech,
and were ev'ry leaflet singing,
they never with praise God's worth could reach,
though earth with their praise were ringing.
Who fully could praise the Light of life
who light to our souls is bringing?

4 As birds in the morning sing their praise,
 God's fatherly love we cherish,
 for giving to us this day of grace,
 for life that shall never perish.
 The church God has kept two thousand years,
 and hungering souls did nourish.

But you may not be familiar with some of the other Happy Dane's songs:

“Generous Fiddler”

Who will play a tune for dancing?
 Who will play the fiddle sweet?
 All the girls are shyly waiting, waiting with impatient feet.
 Fiddler, fiddler, come you soon,
 And play us all a merry tune.

Refrain:

Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la.

“Now, before I make you music,
 You must pay the fiddler's fee!”
 “Ah, we've neither pence nor farthing,
 Poor and humble fold are we.”
 “Naught care I for what you say!
 If you must dance thane I must play.” *Refrain*

And my favorite:

“Roselil”

Roselil and her mother sat talking one day;
 They laughed and they jested so merry were they.

Refrain:

Ha-ha-ha, saa-saa-saa-saa, Ha-ha-ha, saa-saa-saa-saa!
 They laughed and they jested so merry were they.

“Ev'ry tree in the garden must blossom with gold,
 Before any man shall have my heart to hold.” *Refrain*

On the porch stood Sir Peder and smiled at the jest.
 The one who laughs last is the one who laughs best. *Refrain*

And when, later, they walked in the garden, behold!
 Each tree bore a ring of most exquisite gold. *Refrain*

Roselil was embarrassed and blushed red as blood.
In silence she gazed at the grass where she stood. *Refrain*

Sir Peder then kissed her—now his was the jest.
The one who laughs last, is the one who laughs best! *Refrain*

“Danish Hiking Song”

1. Hustle up you lazy good-for-nothing sofa lover
Dust the cobwebs from your soul.
Join our happy song
As we stride along
With the forests and the fields our goal.
Take your leave from books our dusty, musty friends and tyrants,
And declare your liberty;
Books may be okay
For another day,
But today we will be gay and free.

Chorus:

Blue skies are calling, Gentle winds are blowing;
Kind Mother Nature heals the strain and ends decay.
Where the flowers bloom and quiet streams are flowing
We find the strength to meet the tasks of today.

2. Join our company of hiking-liking nature seekers,
Fall in line and step along!
Drive away the blues
Sing the song you choose,
and the weakest will grow glad and strong!
Though your spirit's low from pennyworries, double-trouble,
Never mind but step along.
If your strength gives out,
Lift your voice and shout,
You will find your second-wind in song! *Chorus*

The Happy Danes of Danebod sing them from memory but have song books for visitors.

Why are these Danes so happy? A recent study shows that Danes are the happiest people because they have the lowest expectations of any people. Low expectations—few disappointments. Maybe that's why, but I doubt it.

I think it is because their faith is in the model of Grundtvig who taught that you are a person first, created in the image of God, and a Christian second so that all people are to be celebrated. He also taught that the power of the Living Word is not simply words in a book to be studied in an academic setting but the Word that is to be lived, taught and proclaimed. They also have a healthy embracing of a Lutheran understanding of the Ascension of Jesus Christ. In our church we celebrate how Jesus, raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, not to escape the earth and all of its pain and suffering but to fill all of creation.

So these Happy Danes get out of bed and go for a hike because they will see Jesus in all of creation. This is not to be confused with pantheism where God equals nature but it is God in Christ filling creation. This is to be celebrated. God in Christ is not far off but in the trees, oceans, mountains, farmland, in an eagle's nest outside of Decorah. Jesus Christ is literally everywhere. That is a faith worth singing, dancing, celebrating and living.

There is a prayer in the ordination service that is offered right before the laying on of hands. This one paragraph prayer provides a summary of salvation history. Here is what is prayed about the ascension:

“We thank you that by his death your Son has overcome death and, having been raised by your mighty power, has ascended far above the heavens, that he might fill all things.”

The Ascension is not the great departure but the great arrival. God, once again, is Immanuel, is with us in yet another marvelous, miraculous way.

Now just in case you believe this is a sermon supporting those who remove themselves from the Christian community, who ignore the proclaimed word and the sacraments in order to find God on the golf course or in the trout stream, that would miss the point. Happy Danes and good Lutherans gather for the dance and song and hike and the Word and the bread and the wine. For in these means of

grace, God's Words and Sacraments, avenues of grace, come forgiveness and salvation. Neither catching a rainbow trout nor getting a hole-in-one can get that job done no matter how much fun it is.

The Ascension does cause us to see the creation with new eyes for it is filled with Jesus and his love. It is to be loved, cared for, faithfully stewarded and not seen simply as something for us to use, consume and lay waste.

Yesterday, was the celebration of the Ascension, once the second highest feast day of the church. Now it is a day too often ignored or forgotten. But tonight we remember and celebrate all that God has done for us in Christ and all that Christ does in the creation that he fills. Let the celebration continue!

Amen.