

'Always Being Made New'

June 7, 2013 + Northeastern Iowa Synod Assembly

Readings: Isaiah 42:5-12; Psalm 96:1-9; 1 Corinthians 12:4-27; Luke 6:20-31

by the Rev. Lowell G. Almen

We have in tonight's Gospel a statement of the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We have in tonight's reading from 1 Corinthians a description of the polity--that is, the pattern of organization--of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We have in tonight's reading from Isaiah an invitation to renewed joy in hearing the word from the God who has claimed us--and our church--to be a light to the nations, even as we join others in singing a new song to our Lord.

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that we leap directly from the pages of Scripture into the present moment. That is a favorite American heresy--but it is not uniquely American. That heresy has been around for a long time. It was evident among some of the radical groups at the time of the sixteenth century Reformations.

The point is this: We can rejoice in our long heritage in being part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. We walk together with our forebears in the faith from the witness of the early church through the centuries to the present moment. But as we walk, we discover that we have come to a particular place. That particular place for us now finds us at the quarter century mark of our life together in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Yet if we take the theme of this anniversary--Always Being Made New--as suggesting that the past does not matter, then we would be foolish. We would be short-sighted. We would be self-centered and self-serving. We would miss the grand call to faithfulness in our life together.

Two-and-a-half centuries ago, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg spoke of church structures as the external scaffolding of the spiritual edifice. Muhlenberg was a pioneer pastor in colonial America. He was instrumental in the creation of the first synod in North America in 1748. With others, he recognized the need to create that external scaffolding to enable those scattered Lutheran congregations to work together--to work together in mutual encouragement, to work together in training and ordaining pastors to lead them, to work together in outreach. That outreach initially focused on the rapid waves of immigrants. Eventually, as the years passed, the focus broadened to include the whole world.

The key principle in the external scaffolding of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the principle of interdependence. In affirming that principle, we as a church are being counter-cultural. The spirit of the times is independence, but as the baptized members of this church, we are committed to interdependence. We see that stated so clearly in our church's constitution. There we read these words, "This church shall seek to function as people of God through congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization, all of which shall be interdependent." Then the statement continues, "Each part, while fully the church, recognizes that it is not the whole church and therefore lives in a partnership relationship with the others" (provision 8.11. in the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*).

To put that principle another way, we hear the Apostle Paul say, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . . [The body does not consist of one member but of many. If a foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that

would not make it any less a part of the body. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

This sense of partnership is crucial as we seek as individuals and this church to be a part of God's mission in our time. Think of the ways in your congregation, think of the ways in this synod, think of the ways that our churchwide ministries together care for the hungry, seek to show compassion to those in sorrow, engage in witness even when others disagree, demonstrate love not only for those easy to love but also toward those who are hostile and uncaring. Indeed, we together in our congregations, in this synod, and in the extended arms of our whole church have heard and responded to our Lord's call to be a light to the nations.

We join together in seeking to be instruments of God's mission in our time. We accomplish together what no individual in this room could achieve. We accomplish together what no single congregation represented here could achieve. We accomplish together through our whole church what no single synod could achieve. And all this is for the sake of God's mission in our time.

So we have, on the one hand, what Pastor Muhlenberg called the external scaffolding. We have, on the other hand, what he spoke of as the spiritual edifice. For the health and well-being of that spiritual edifice--namely to undergird our life together in the church as members of the body of Christ--we have the external scaffolding of structure, systems, decision-making patterns, planning, organization, and even orders of worship.

Both are important--both the external scaffolding and the spiritual edifice. But each has its own character. Perhaps an illustration would be helpful. Sally and I drive very differently. Oh, we both stay on the road. But driving for me is more a matter of organization and long-range planning. For Sally, it is much more a journey of enjoyment. The most obvious difference between us involves a multi-lane street or highway. I want to know at least three miles ahead whether I need to be in the left-hand lane or the right-hand lane for our next turn. And I try to be in that lane at least a half-mile ahead of the turn. For Sally, the mission of driving is more of a happening. I like 2,500 feet to prepare for the turn. She's willing to get ready for that turn in 50 feet. Across a multi-lane highway in heavy traffic, that can get very exciting.

For most of us, the mission of the church excites us. And that is great. In fact, I came to realize over the decades that the congregations I visited that seemed the most effective and mission-minded were those that had a strong sense of that mission not only within the congregation and the community but also had that same intense sense of mission for the work carried out through the synod and work that touches the whole world through our churchwide ministries. That make all that work together, the external scaffolding of organization and systems is needed.

With that model of driving, I represent organization. Sally represents mission. In another words, if you were to travel with me, I would get you to the airport on time. But if you traveled with Sally, you would have much more fun.

Lest you think I only see the church as structure--as external scaffolding--let me confess this: Whenever the creed is confessed and we get to the last part about the one holy catholic and apostolic church, vivid images from throughout the world flash through my mind. Those images are reminders to me of the ways in which you and I together--through our church--are helping to change the world.

Let me offer another illustration--this one also from driving. A few years ago, Sally and I were traveling in the Texas panhandle on Interstate 40. At the time, as I recall, the speed limit there for cars was 70 and for trucks 65. We caught up to a transport truck. As we passed that

truck and trailer, I mentioned that the rig had Illinois license plates. I also noticed on the door of the cab that the trucking company was located in our town in Illinois.

We continued traveling at about 70 miles an hour until we experienced ground fog some miles down the road. We slowed to about 40 because of low-lying, limited visibility. Through the fog, I could see in the rear-view mirror our Illinois truck driver. He was catching up to us. From his high cab, he could see above the fog. He had a range of vision that we did not have. He passed us, but as he returned to the right lane ahead of us, he slowed down. He drove at a safe distance ahead of us, but he kept us in sight behind him even as he watched the road ahead. He became our guide through the fog. We were in that fog together, but his wider perspective helped us safely along the way.

As sisters and brothers in Christ, we are on the way together. As the baptized members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are on the way together. Think of your congregation. You may realize, from time to time, that the pastor or some group of members will guide you through the fog of this issue or that issue. They will help you understand that we all are on the way together.

In this Northeastern Iowa Synod, we also are on the way together. In fact, the root meaning of the word "synod" points to being on the way together. The bishop or members of the Synod Council or individuals committed to lifting our vision will help us through the fog of uncertainty and guide us and all the congregations of this synod on our way together.

Likewise, through our churchwide ministries, we join hands with others. We are a light to the nations. And together, by means of the external scaffolding of our churchwide ministries, we are helping to change the world in the name of Christ.

Congregations, synods, churchwide ministries--". . .each part while fully the church recognizes that it is not the whole church and therefore lives in a partnership relationship with the others." We are on the way together through our church.

On this milestone of the twenty-fifth anniversary of our first full year together in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we pause to give thanks to God. We give thanks especially for the deeper demonstration of Lutheran unity made possible through the ELCA. We also give thanks because we realize that, by God's grace, we as individuals and as a church are always being made new.