

Worthy of our Calling

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...a Conference day sermon reflecting on Churchwide decisions

The question I invite you to reflect on with me comes from the first verse of chapter four of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The question is, "How shall we live a life that is worthy of our baptismal calling with humility, gentleness, meekness, and patience, when in fact we are engaged in a serious biblical and theological debate?"

Now, this debate is not just about how the church should respond to persons who are gay and/or lesbian and in committed relationships; this disagreement is not only about whether or not it should be permissible for congregations who wish to do so to bless such persons, nor whether the church or synods who wish to do so should ordain such persons. No, this question is deeper and more complicated than that because it involves very different ways of seeing, understanding, and interpreting the authority of scripture for our lives!

Have you noticed, as you have been engaged in conversation about these issues, that our first tendency is to see who can quote the most scripture verses at one another to support one's position—and then when the other person quotes different passages that argue for a different understanding than your own, there is a tendency to get angry or to feel so hurt that not much is accomplished? And both of you leave frustrated, misunderstood, and profoundly sad?

Now, many of you know I am a fairly competitive person when it comes to sports and games – that is probably an understatement! I remember early in my marriage this competitive spirit would show up in a variety of things – like card games with friends or little arguments with Cindy about who was right or who was wrong. And I discovered then that the harder I argued for my position, the harder Cindy would argue for hers – until finally one or both of us would become so angry that we would walk away in disgust – or pout for a while!

Sometimes I am a slow learner; but gradually God taught me that, in marriage and in family relationships, you can win an argument and lose the relationship all at the same time! Slowly I began to learn how to frame our issues and discussions differently—around how *our relationship* could win, rather than how *I, as an individual*, could win! Gradually I discovered that whatever helped our love, our trust, and our communications grow deeper and stronger with each other was more important than getting my way or proving my point or winning an argument.

It didn't mean that we disagreed with each other any less often. It didn't mean that we simply ignored our differences or gave in to unreasonable expectations; but rather it meant we learned—together – to issue fewer ultimatums. Instead, we began to ask each other more thoughtful questions. We began to be more patient in our listening, and we

didn't feed the anger with inflammatory remarks, but gave each other space to cool off and to think about things before we would try again to work them out.

As I read Paul's letter to the Ephesians— especially the fourth chapter— it seems clear to me that God is saying to us that, ultimately, how we treat one another when we have serious disagreements in the church is important to God. We do not have God's permission to simply write one another off, or to label, blame, and criticize a brother or sister in Christ with whom we disagree.

Remember Paul's words in Ephesians 4? ***“I, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit . For there is one body, and one spirit just as you are called to the one calling, one word, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all, through all, and in all.”***

I must admit that when I read these words, part of me wants to say, “Come on Paul, be real. This is the 21st Century we live in as members of a culture and society that thrives on cutthroat competition, where winning isn't a good thing, it is the *only* thing. Power, control, influence, status and money are the everyday tools of the world we are living in. It is how we get our way; it's how things get done by the shakers, movers and leaders who know how to play the game. And even to a large extent in our congregations today we see some of these same power games being played out! So come on Paul, get real! Get with the times! You are so out of touch with reality! Or is it possible – just maybe possible that you are in touch with a much different reality and you are inviting us into this much larger reality that is God's reality?”

In ***Eat This Book***, author Eugene Peterson writes some helpful words that hint at this whole other reality that God through Christ Jesus invites us in on. He writes, *“This world, this reality, revealed by God speaking to us, is not the kind of world to which we are accustomed. It is not a neat and tidy world in which we are in control – there is mystery everywhere that takes considerable getting used to. The world revealed by God's word has so much more to it, in it, and behind it than our ego-centered world, that we can't be expected to understand it all at once.*

But God is patient with us. That is why we pray what we read. Prayer is the way we work our way out of the comfortable but cramped world of self into the self-denying but spacious world of God.” Peterson goes on to say that *“God doesn't make us do any of this – God's word is personal, addressing, inviting, commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, and directing – but not forcing, not coercing. We are given space and freedom to answer and to enter into conversation. From beginning to end the Word of God is a dialogical word - a word that invites participation. No text can be understood out of its 'entire' context. The most 'entire' context is Jesus – every biblical text must be read in the living presence of Jesus.”*

What these words suggest to me is the realization that any biblical or theological interpretation and disagreement is not simply about a text itself—or even a number of texts—nor an interpretation of what is permissible or not permissible. Instead every passage of Scripture opens us to a deeper revelation of who and how and what God has made himself known to us in and through Jesus Christ and by his death and resurrection. The reason this is so important for me to keep in mind is that it reminds me that this is not my argument to win or to lose, or to define or to attack as I please or as I think best, so much as it is an invitation to a much deeper dialogue and conversation and prayerful response to God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and God the Holy Spirit!

In other words, there is an opportunity that we as Lutherans have here to model to the world around us—the world that is looking in, that is paying attention on the Internet—that is reading the newspapers; that is listening to our words, to our tone of voice, to our actions and reactions.

The world is listening to see if one more time we Christians will attack and destroy each other in bitterness, wrath, anger, and judgment—or in other words, whether we will act the way this world understands so well: winning at all costs and taking no prisoners. Or whether there is another way to respond out of a deeper identity in Christ—a deeper kind of oneness and unity of the Spirit in our baptism—a deeper kind of trust in the living presence of Jesus, who is with us and who is incarnated in our lives so that we may bear Christ to one another...the Christ who enters into our messy complicated, sin-filled, and conflicted lives through his body and blood – broken and poured out for us in such a significant life-changing way that changes us from the inside out and makes it possible for us to live in a different reality – a God reality!

You see, in Christ it is possible for us to be angry—really angry; to be upset—really upset; to be disappointed—really disappointed; *and yet not to let the sun go down on our anger*—not to let the anger lead us into a greater kind of sin and brokenness that hurts others and that grieves the Holy Spirit. But instead, in Christ and through Christ, and with Christ, it is possible for us to disagree with one another and yet at the same time to put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander together with all malice – and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us.

The world is watching closely to see how we treat one another, how we handle our disagreements about the authority and interpretation of Scripture. Make no mistake about it; the world is watching closely how we speak to one another as South Carolina Lutherans, and how we speak to and about our brothers and sisters throughout the ELCA. I believe there is a tremendous opportunity here for us to practice what we preach, for us to show others what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus in the midst of our disappointment, and our struggle to be faithful.

There is an opportunity for us in every conversation to ask one another the all-important question of not just “Where do you stand?”, nor “Do you read and understand God’s word?”, nor even “How should the church respond to persons who are gay or lesbian?”,

but rather the deeper questions, “What is God up to in the middle of all this? What does it mean to seek first God’s Kingdom and God’s righteousness in this moment of time? What is the Holy Spirit teaching us, calling us, inviting us, to see and to respond to in this moment of History, of His Story of God’s Story that we are all a part of? How shall we live a life worthy of our calling to which we’ve all been called? What does it mean for us to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? And, in this competitive ‘winner take-all’ world where we live, how can we live with our deep disagreements as God’s family– with all humility and gentleness, with patience, and bearing one another in love?”

Together, all of us here in the South Carolina Synod and throughout the ELCA are wrestling with these same questions; and whatever answers we come up with we know and believe that God is with us right here in our midst and will continue to open our hearts and minds to his loving will and purpose for our lives. There is a prayer from our LBW and ELW – that I have often prayed over the years in every congregation I have served that I invite us to pray together now and pray together often.

THE CHURCH

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

AMEN!

Bishop Herman Yoos