

Mission and Tradition

I feel like I've spent the last few months in a personal war with "Lutheran Lifestyle". This fall I've been interim pastor at a congregation whose pastor of 22 years passed away suddenly last summer. They are a small group of mostly elderly folks who had been inching their way toward looking at their collective future until July when their future was thrust upon them with this drastic change.

Since last spring I had been working as a consultant with their council (at the invitation of their pastor) trying to help them look at a variety of future possibilities, so I was willing to accept the interim position temporarily to help them continue that process in a more accelerated fashion.

What I have seen played out through numerous discussions, both formal and informal, as well as in all the other details of being together in a parish setting, is a distinction I discovered in a little book by David Luecke called *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance*. In this book, Luecke distinguishes between village churches and camp churches. He says that Lutheran congregations are, for the most part, village churches, which are "the result of stability in community relationships. Being born into a given church is the natural first step in the pattern of growing up, living, and dying in one locality. The pattern assumes that one's parents were part of that community and in due time one's children will be, too. The church community was usually there before its current participants came along, and the church's task is to help them find their appropriate place in it."

Camp churches, which Luecke claims to be of a more evangelical stripe, are "the result of instability or impermanence in community relations. It happens among people on the move, who

have little common history. A camp church has to start its community of faith over and over again.”

Finally, he simplifies the distinction between the two styles thus: “In a village church, belonging comes before consciously believing. That can happen through Baptism, when someone is born into an established community of faith. In a camp church, consciously believing comes before belonging. That is important when the community of faith has to establish itself each time anew.”

Now instead of veering off into an argument about infant baptism versus believer’s baptism, I’d like to explore this village/camp distinction and look at how village church Lutherans might be involved in mission to the world instead of merely protecting our lifestyle turf.

If I were to quote from the Augsburg Confession, article seven about the church [“For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.”] I know that the folks I’ve been working with would say, “Yes, absolutely, we believe that. We also believe that our traditions, our ceremonies are right for us. We’re not asking anyone else to do what we do, but, by the same token, nobody can tell us to do something else.”

True enough. But is a congregation in mission to the world when its primary concern is to preserve the traditions that have been passed down? While Word and Sacrament are embedded in the middle of the traditions, and the congregation is church, their ceremonies, which surround the essence of what is church,

nonetheless seem to choke off the joy of the Lord, which is our strength.

I bring all of this to your attention, not to criticize the people I've been working with and have come to love. I bring these things to your attention because I see these people suffering for their commitment to traditions that are choking the life out of their congregation and I wonder why they keep pursuing this painful course. What is it about village church life that they're willing to, literally, die for as a congregation?

I'm going to make a guess here, not having grown up as a village church person myself, and I'm sure if I'm way off base plenty of you will let me know about it soon enough. I believe that village church life offered a kind of integration of life into a cohesive whole based in the congregational community that gave people a sense of security and wholeness that no options they see around today come close to. Luecke says that "each [congregation] was a rather self-sufficient center for the social and economic life of families that lived in that same area for generations." If such a way of life worked for you, how safe you must have felt! And it is easy to understand that in these times of upheaval and uncertainty you would hang on to even the remnants of such a community with the last ounce of strength in your body instead of letting go of that last little bit of security in the face of so much chaos.

The only time I experienced anything like this was during a two-week trip to Israel/Palestine a couple of years ago. Our tour group consisted of cradle Christians, mostly Lutheran. We prayed together in the morning and the evening, we communed together and we read the Bible when we went to particular landmarks. There was some danger involved with some of the places we visited, but somehow, being together and knowing that we had

prayed for safe passage, the whole experience was awe inspiring rather than terrifying.

I noticed something about myself as our time together progressed. My personal prayer life seemed to drift away. I felt so well cared for inside that web of Christian community that I didn't feel the need to pray by myself. When I was alone in my room I listened to music, read my novel or wrote letters home. I didn't need anything else because it was all provided in the way we were living.

I can see how that unintended consequence of living together in Christian community, dependence on the community faith life at the expense of your own, could leave you unprepared for a time when that particular form of community was being eroded. If your faith life is Rally Day, the church picnic, Christmas tree decorating, singing particular hymns with a pipe organ accompaniment, how can you let any of it go if your faith is important to you? You can't.

Yet our foremothers and forefathers risked excommunication and death standing for the right to trust Christ alone as our savior and the justification God offers us through faith in Jesus. Their lives changed drastically, and not all for the good, to live in the joy of this freedom.

As one who never had the option of being a "DNA Lutheran" even when I desperately wanted to be one, I know that it is possible to live an integrated Lutheran life via the Gospel. It's not particularly easy, but as I live day by day, I find that the Good News of our Lord gives me a center and an anchor that frees me to move among the myriad of cultures of which our world is composed. I don't have to be afraid that somehow my faith in Christ will be diminished by contact with traditions "not like ours." No, I don't feel comfortable a lot of the time, but the

peace our Lord gives us isn't the absence of any friction in our lives, it's the right to walk up to the throne of God and say, "Mommy/Daddy, I need to talk to you."

And I find that when I keep my focus on what we're called to do (making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free), I don't worry much about which setting in the Lutheran Book of Worship we use. Is the way we worship important? Absolutely. Is the way we conduct ourselves in community important? Beyond a shadow of a doubt. But it's also important to realize that our traditions need to serve our mission, rather than the other way around.

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