

Speaking from the Heart

Colleagues,

Last week the bishop of the Central States Synod of the ELCA—my bishop—Gerald (“Jerry”) Mansholt was in St. Louis talking to a strange-and-wonderful bunch of Missouri Synod and ELCA pastors, local folks all sitting together around tables having lunch. The group consists of parish pastors “from both sides of the aisle.” For some years now they have been regularly “crossing the canyon” to talk shop. Last week’s invited speaker was Mansholt, who himself grew up “Missouri” in small-town rural Illinois. Jerry was in the first graduating class of Seminex (1974)—hence no longer kosher in the Missouri Synod. Now rostered in the ELCA, he held pastorates in Missouri and Kansas before becoming our bishop a few years ago. Here’s what he said. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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Today is Valentine’s Day but I don’t imagine that was uppermost on your mind when you extended the invitation to me a couple of months ago. This day is one of those days popular in our culture that also may have some roots in Christian tradition. This is a day when a St. Valentine is remembered in the Roman calendar, though we don’t know a whole lot about the person or persons. One website I looked at described Valentine something like this: we remember a martyr from the 3rd century for some unknown but probably good reason. The Church is built upon the

faith of the apostles and the blood of martyrs; many of the latter were common, ordinary, everyday persons whose names are known today only by God in heaven. What we do know is these early Christians were of such a faith and life, they were willing to give their very lives unto death. Valentine's Day today in this culture is a day about romantic love—dinners, chocolates, flowers and those little candy hearts with cute sayings. Enough about Valentine's Day connections, except for this...

A few years ago one of the Deans our Area Ministries invited me to visit with pastors and lay rostered leaders. The invitation was specific in one sense. Said the Dean: don't tell us about a church program, or a vision for mission, or something coming down from church hierarchy. Tell us what you are passionate about, what's on your heart. I knew what he was driving at. He is a very fine pastor, gifted theologically, a heart bursting with care and love for people, plus a critical eye. He wanted me to speak to the heart, to feed those who were gathered, and to speak from the heart.

That can be dangerous, of course, because what is on my heart and yours might not be what is on the heart of God. Out of the heart flow all sorts of nasty things, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount. Create in me a clean heart, O God, the psalmist says. Lift up your hearts, we say in the liturgy, knowing very well that there are days when hearts are despondent and it takes something from outside us to lift them in joy and peace. I think these are exceedingly stressful days for pastors and lay leaders in the church, but more on that later. There are things that cause our hearts to be weighed down, our hearts to be distracted, our hearts to be confused, our hearts to be compromised. So, it was good to hear the lesson from 2 Corinthians 4 recently, where Paul says, we do not lose heart. We may be shipwrecked, pained, confused,

suffering in the soul, buffeted by all sorts of pressures, even challenged and opposed, but we do not lose heart. We proclaim not ourselves but Jesus Christ; the One in whose very face the light and glory of God has shone.

If you are sensing a theme here, you are correct. I want to speak to you today from the heart, from my heart, and, Lord, have mercy on me for even daring to speak so boldly, but about the things that are on the heart of God.

Now the Bible is filled with references to the human heart. When we speak about a person, about what a person is really like, we speak of what is on a person's heart. That person has a good heart; a heart of gold, a generous heart. We say we know where that person's heart really is! The heart, biblically speaking, is the seat of the will, the emotions; it is the essence of who we are as human beings. And, the heart is the point of contact with God. God addresses us in the heart, and Jesus says you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as well.

A couple of weeks ago I was with Pr. John Reigstad of Resurrection Lutheran Church walking around some of the rubble of the burned-down building. Resurrection Lutheran Church, on Fair and West Florissant here in St. Louis, burned on Christmas Eve. Resurrection is the result of a merger of three congregations; the building is from the former Pilgrim Lutheran Church. I did not see the video footage as some of you did but I understand it was a traffic-stopping blaze. I'm sure some of you have been by the site; it is a total destruction.

Resurrection today is a small urban congregation struggling with a host of problems related to small membership, urban decay and racism and poverty. But in many respects it is not that different really from some rural congregations in north

central Kansas, where population decline on the Great Plains means the main export from the community is children. They grow up and then move to where the jobs are. The result is that the median age of congregations in some places is over 70. And Resurrection isn't that different from other congregations in growing areas, where the population is booming but the congregation is declining. The population around them may be Hispanic (as in Garden City, Dodge City, and Liberal, Kansas, where the Hispanic population now is nearly 50%) or suburban white and growing by great numbers. But our congregations are declining and dying.

Now I truly was thinking some of these very things while walking in the debris of the burned-down building of Resurrection Lutheran Church here in St. Louis when I saw a page from the Lutheran Book of Worship, burned around the edges. I was able to determine the hymn, No. 403:

Lord, speak to us that we might speak
in living echoes of your tone;
as you have sought, so let us seek
your straying children, lost and lone.

The hymn on the other side of the page, No. 402, was one less familiar to me:

Look from your sphere of endless day,
O God of mercy and of might,
In pity look on those who stray
So blindly in this land of light.

Send us your people, Lord, to call
the thoughtless hardened, young and old,
a scattered homeless flock, till all
are gathered in your peaceful fold.

A week from today is Shrove Tuesday, or International Pancake Day, I recently discovered. My wife Anita and I were at IHOP [International House of Pancakes] and there saw the advertisement for free pancakes on February 20, a subtle capitalizing on Fat Tuesday, for those who have eyes to see. The folk in Liberal, Kansas will race and flip pancakes with their counterparts in Olney, England.

Then comes Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent. Ashes are placed upon the forehead with the sign of the cross and congregations will begin a period of renewal. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Ashes, signs of destruction and death. Dust you are and to dust you shall return, we say as they are applied. Maybe we should also say of ourselves and of our congregations, using the words of the liturgy for the graveside service ...in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life we commit our very selves to dying, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless us and keep us.

There are major issues before the Church in North America today, not only before us Lutherans but before the whole of Christ's Church in this culture. I hear about them all the time. Bishop, are we growing? How's the membership? What's happening to mission support? We are on a more-than-40-year decline of financial support for the national church, and this is true not only for the ELCA and the LCMS but for all mainline denominations. Last year alone the ELCA lost 75,000 members, more than the size of the Central States Synod. This loss was not because of large congregations leaving the church body; these are simply people drifting away, young and old.

People are quick to come up with solutions to problems. Bishop, if only you did this or did not do that. If only you used this

program and modified the music and liturgy in this way. There are elements of truth in many things that are suggested but they are far from the whole truth.

I have come to the conviction that the issues before us are much deeper and they have to do with who we understand ourselves to be and what we are called to be about in the world today. At the heart of the matter are issues of identity and mission: Who are we? What are we called to do? Simply put, they are matters of the heart. And what we need in the church is not 40 days of superficial Lent, but perhaps 40 years of fasting, 40 years of wilderness struggle, 40 years of living on daily manna. We need a generational change, a rediscovery of what it means to be a people called by God, formed around the cross of Jesus, dying to the old, and becoming the Body of Christ, giving heart and soul, mind and strength in witness and service to the world.

It is an age-old problem, to be sure. Lutherans, of all people, realize theologically the depth of sin. We are in bondage to sin. We cannot free ourselves. We are blind to the truth of our lives and the ways of God. We need nothing less than a Word from outside of our life and experience to set us free. Hence, the Good News of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who, though we were yet sinners, even enemies of God, died for us. Christ died for our sins and has reconciled us to the God and Father of us all (Romans 5). This is the Good News that has not changed.

What has changed, so dramatically and at an increasingly rapid pace, even in our own life time, is the culture around us. It has been happening for a long period of time, going back in some respects at least to the Reformation and the beginning of denominational life. Then the formation of this country with the separation of Church and State accelerated the cultural

divide.

Now a consumerist culture has hit us full throttle, with faith privatized, with individual right and value the highest good. The Gospel itself has become commodified and Christian community ever more strained and broken. I am sure you have found yourself saying: what worked yesterday doesn't work today! Something has changed, and it is not the Gospel, not the nature of Church and community. What has changed is the culture around us. This very change is causing all sorts of stress upon our life and will be forcing us more and more to deal with very basic questions: who are we and what is our mission?

Church is boring. I am amazed at how often a congregation member will say this to me at an Adult Forum: our youth think church is boring. To which I say, church is boring not only to youth but to many adults. And boredom is not cured by making the music louder! Church is boring because we have lost our way. We have little passion for mission. Too many among us do not have the foggiest notion of what biblical Christianity entails, what it means to walk in the steps of Jesus. Too many know next to nothing about the basic tenets of Lutheran theology. We are more concerned about what goes on within our own lives, our own congregation, our own denomination, than what takes place in the community and society around us. Young people are bored because they do not know a Gospel that is worth dying for. People get bored because they think of the Gospel as a commodity to be consumed instead of a death to be experienced. They do not know a faith worth giving their life for, worth sacrificing their all.

But let any youth, young adult or older adult get engaged in faith, trust in this word of Jesus, have a heart locked into love of God and neighbor, and life is anything but boring. Then lives will be engaged and passionate. They will have all kinds

of questions about faith and life. They will be risking, giving, hurting, suffering, rejoicing, hoping against all odds. But their lives won't be bored! Is life or ministry boring? Put your trust in this word addressed to us in Jesus, venture forth in faith. Trust you are reconciled and free, and have nothing to fear. Such faith transforms us and leads to giving life away in witness and service. Life then is anything but boring.

So we do not lose heart! There are days when I get down because I know we are going through some massive changes, culturally and ecclesialogically. We have more than 40 days of a wilderness through which to travel. There will be significant dying before resurrection to new life. But because of the Promise of God, we do not lose heart.

I am thankful for faithful pastors, for those who think theologically, for those who love and serve their congregations with strong leadership, for those who teach and preach. I am thankful for truth-tellers, those who tell the truth about God, and those who speak the truth of our lives. We cannot ignore the pain of the world, the suffering of the least, the hungers of the world. The challenges are great: this disastrous war in Iraq, the plight of Palestinian Christians, death in Darfur.

But we do not lose heart. We have this treasure in earthen vessels. Each of us is but a work in progress: individually as pastors, our congregations as missional communities, our denominations as expressions of the wider Church and vehicles of global ministry. We may be cracked, tarnished, flawed, imperfect in so many ways. But we have this treasure, a pulsating, life-giving treasure, that ultimately is the hope for the world.

A few years ago the theme for the Lutheran World Federation Assembly was For the Healing of the World. Walter Cardinal

Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promoting of Christian Unity, spoke movingly in Winnipeg of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the healing so desperately needed by all the world. Cardinal Kasper is a delightful and humble man who radiates joy and hope. He spoke of the healing that flows from God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ; he lifted up the importance of the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification. Here is where healing begins, he said, in God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ. Here is God's gift in Jesus Christ: the healing of the heart, the healing of communities and nations, the healing of divisions among Christians and people of all faiths.

My friends and colleagues, do not lose heart. Stay connected with one another, especially through these days of enormous change. Keep trusting and risking and venturing forth, not knowing where all this will lead, but knowing that God is already there. Lead your people into Lent, these 40 days to come and beyond. Speak the truth to them and urge them to listen for the voice of God today.

The voice today is the same voice of the past. But a new context with new and different challenges means we hear the voice differently, even freshly. God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, is calling yet again, calling us through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "Return," the voice says, "and claim with new vibrancy what has already been given you, a renewed heart, a renewed life and mission in the world." By the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ, we are the Body of Christ in the world today. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" were the post-Easter words of Jesus to the disciples. And, the last I checked, we are still post-Easter. Christ is risen, the Spirit is empowering and gifting, and we are called to return and reclaim. We get to leave so much behind, so much in ashes of repentance. But without that burdensome baggage we

travel evermore lightly and are free to be who we are: the Body of Christ sent into the world today, to serve and witness to God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ.

Gerald L. Mansholt