

The Vatican and me

In the February 1999 issue, "The Lutheran" ran a one paragraph article on page 42: "The Vatican, in a 'Final Declaration' statement, warned that the world is facing a crisis in faith provoked in part by the feminist doctrine that men and women are absolute equals. 'Generally throughout the world, there is evidence of a weakening of faith in Christ, as well as a distortion of some doctrines based on Scriptures and the early councils of the church,' the statement says. Feminism, the statement continues, contributed to a permissiveness that created 'great problems for Christian morality: indifference to the poor, racial prejudice and violence, abortion, euthanasia, the legitimation of homosexual relationships and other immoral forms of sexual activity.'"

My first thought about this "Final Declaration" is that feminism (I am using the Rebecca West definition of a feminist here: a person who expresses sentiments about women which differentiate them from doormats) really has made a dent in the world psyche; we must be a genuine threat to get this kind of overt tongue lashing.

My second thought is "there but for the grace of God..." Since the ELCA stands in opposition to such declarations by our words and our deeds, I have the privilege of exercising my call from God as a pastor in this church body and I will be eternally grateful for that privilege.

My third thought is that those of us who teach and preach theology of the cross have the additional privilege of ministering to the folks who continue to get caught in the backwash from such statements. Let me explain. Between the visit of "il Papa" to St. Louis last month and the class in Patristics I'm taking this semester, it is becoming clearer to me what is

part of our call as Lutheran theologians into the 21st century. We get to live and speak law and promise theology with those who are not too prideful to come to God, nor fearful of a wrathful God, but who think that they are WORTH SO LITTLE that God doesn't want to have anything to do with them.

Think about it for a moment. For people who have been told by the likes of the Vatican or the civil powers of the land that they are not truly and fully human, it only makes sense that Jesus Christ who came for MANKIND is not their savior. These are not folks who walk away from God because they think they don't need God. They walk away because, after being left out time and again, after being told they don't measure up, they've decided that "If God doesn't want me, then I don't want God." And all we may hear from such a one who is, by now, a professional at protecting their wounded heart is "I don't need God."

Aha, you may say, they're absolutely right, they don't measure up. "You are scum, get over here so God can save you." But didn't Peter say that the goodness of God leads us to repentance? O.K., then let's turn it around and say instead, "God loves you unconditionally and that there's never been any problem between you and God except your low self-esteem." The first thing that comes to mind here is what Isaiah says will happen to shepherds who mislead God's flock. We know it's not true that low self-esteem is humanity's God-sized problem. There is an ontological (Occasionally I enjoy using one of these words I've paid so much money to learn – ontological, for those of you who were smart enough to go into real estate instead of theology, means in your being as opposed to what you do) problem between God and us that demands an answer which goes way beyond self-affirmation statements.

But how to express that in ways which will touch the hearts and souls of people (I'm sure you've realized by now that I'm not

just talking about women) who have rejected God not because they consider themselves “super-human,” but because they’ve absorbed and continue to live their lives in accordance with the voices that tell them they are “sub-human”?

One way that comes to mind first is to lift up the image of voices. Who do we listen to? Do we listen to the words of someone who says that we aren’t fully human or do we listen to God who says that we are who God has made us created in Christ Jesus unto good works that God prepared beforehand to be our way of life? (Eph 2:10)

No doubt many of you have already discovered some of these realities as you minister in your venue. If you have further insights (or, to be fair, arguments with what I’m proposing), please write and we’ll continue the discussion. I think it’s an important one.

And let us pray that this “Final Declaration” is indeed the Vatican’s last word on the subject. I fear further words will include specifications for the length of stakes and amount of kindling needed to get a good hot fire started. But even then we’d be in good company.