

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

August 12, 2007

Pr. Dawn Roginski

While I was in my entrance interview, one of the members of the committee asked a strange question. He started by commenting, I notice you were raised Roman Catholic. I confirmed his comment. He went on to ask, "What about Mary?" I was not sure what he was trying to find out, so I said, What do you want to know about her? He then asked, what do you think about her? I told him, "she is the mother of Jesus, the mother of God". He seemed to be satisfied with my answer and moved on to another topic, while the other committee members looked puzzled.

This was the start of my concern about others questioning whether I was "Lutheran enough" and it comes out most often when I am asked to talk about Mary. After doing some research on Luther's theology of Mary, you may be interested to know that his understanding is actually almost identical to the understanding in the Catholic church I attended. First, Luther believed that Mary was a virgin before and after Jesus was born. Also, he believed that it was alright to ask Mary to pray with you as long as you were not praying to her rather than God. This was the understanding I gained from the somewhat liberal Catholic church I attended.

Luther has a fairly traditional understanding of Mary, and his mind she is humble, holy, and obedient. In Luther's era, it was important for God's child to be completely pure. For many centuries, women were encouraged to be like Mary in complete obedience and meekness, giving rise to all the orders of nuns. But today, even the nuns would disagree with making women try and conform to the standard of being only obedient, meek and holy. We uphold the dignity of women and recognize that women can be strong, independent, capable while still perhaps being holy and obedient.

Some Lutherans, giving up their own fear of looking Catholic, are trying to return to a devotion of Mary, reflected in the fact we have this feast day today. But to make this new devotion relevant, we need to include a new image of Mary. We do not need to worry about whether or not she was a virgin or whether she was pure because that ultimately does not matter. Her importance was that she gave birth to Jesus, the Christ. This Mary said yes to God even when she knew it would mean difficulties. She said yes to God when she knew it might cause some scandal because she knew was told how important this child would become to the whole world. The Mary who would speak to this generation would be really interested in how the justice she talks about in her Magnificat is being lived out. She might ask how we are working to birth Christ again into our world. There were many examples of how the mighty were held on their throne over the last week. Those in power, including the presiding bishop used their influence over the memorials committee so that they changed their recommendation. Attention to process was considered more important than the pain of those being marginalized. Good order was

more important than helping the church become more welcoming and inclusive. Trust in bishops was more important than trust in each other. Bishops from RIC synods even bought into this idea, changing their stance for justice into a concern for this good order. Time and time again, the voices of those asking for justice were not heard, or even silenced. Mary would probably say, and we could agree with her that these actions do not reflect the spirit of Christ and do not help to bring that spirit of Christ alive in the world. They seem to forge that Jesus did not say, knock and we will think about it, study it, and make sure it is in good order, then the door will be opened.

Some things that happened this week were a mixed bag. Even though the vote to change the policy lost, it was the first time we actually had the chance to have a clear up or down vote and 44% of the assembly did vote for change. I would like to read part of the press release from the ELCA that went out yesterday. By a vote of 538 to 431, the assembly encouraged the ELCA's synods, bishops and presiding bishop to "refrain from or demonstrate restraint in disciplining" people and congregations who call qualified leaders on the professional rosters of the ELCA "who are in a mutual, chaste and faithful, committed, same-gender relationship." The assembly also stated that the same restraint should apply to the professional leaders who are on the official rosters and are in committed same-gender relationships. The proposal was adopted by the assembly as a substitute for a recommendation of the Memorials Committee.

The substitute proposal was made by the Rev. Paul R. Landahl, bishop of the ELCA Metropolitan Chicago Synod. He said, "We pray that somebody here today will listen to what we are trying to say and give us some breathing space to do what God is calling us to do." "We need to refrain from harming good leaders," said Eric M. Peterson, ELCA South-Central Synod of Wisconsin. "Stop the bleeding of our church, and focus on mission and ministry."

At a news conference following the decision, the Rev. Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop, said the key words from the adopted action were that the Churchwide Assembly "prays, urges, and encourages" refraining or demonstrating restraint in discipline. "These are words of counsel. They are not words that change the standards of the church. They reflect the mind of this assembly as it seeks to give counsel to the leaders of the church."

In a separate decisions, the assembly referred memorials to the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality regarding requests to make changes in ELCA clergy standards. The assembly added an amendment to the referral, directing the task force to "specifically address and make recommendations to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly on changes to any policies that preclude practicing homosexual persons from the rosters of the church." The assembly also referred other related memorials on sexuality to the task force.

So these decisions were a disappointment to many but there were also many instances over the week where Christ's spirit was being birthed. Memorials were passed strengthening the World relief fund, Hunger relief and Lutheran education. Ecumenical relationships were strengthened.

A strategy for HIV/Aids was developed. Support was given for our veterans. The lowly were lifted up, the hungry were fed, the sick cared for.

A new strategy was developed within Goodsoil as well. Instead of direct action, it was decided we would follow a process of graceful engagement. We wore rainbow scarves made by people around the country much like this one. We ate meals with voting members, sharing our stories and developing relationships. Sometimes the voting members even sought us out to ask our opinion. One of the most powerful things that happened was the Goodsoil worship service. The service was filled with power through the music, through ECP and ELCA pastors processing and being part of the service together and through gifted preaching by Pr. Bradley Schmealing. One of the best parts, however, was that there were 600 chairs set up, and that wasn't enough. It was a statement of solidarity with us for justice in the ELCA.

All of these are signs that the ELCA is moving closer to living out the Magnificat. The powerful are still on their throne, but perhaps not as high as before. I have hope that the spirit we started to birth will continue to grow, bringing about a new church where all who are called to ministry will be able to serve, all who want to worship are welcomed, and we can work together to heal the world.

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