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HISTORICAL SERIES, 15

Call, Challenge, and Reformation

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(Rev. Raymond L. Schultz is the third National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada [ELCIC], having succeeded Rev. Telmor G. Sartison in that ministry in 2001. Prior to that he was the second Bishop of the British Columbia Synod of the ELCIC, serving from 1998 to 2001. This sermon was preached on Reformation Sunday, 28 October 2001, at All Saints Anglican Cathedral in Edmonton. Present were the diocesan bishop, the Very Reverend Victoria Matthews and the Most Reverend Michael Peers, the then Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada.)

I am delighted to be among you tonight. Greetings from your sisters and brothers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada. This summer's assemblies of our two Churches made permanent that which was tentative. Interim sharing of the Eucharist has become full communion.¹

The destination we have reached is so joyous because we have been on a marvelous journey together. The journey has been full of challenge, discovery, and adventure. Sometimes it has been full of confusion. When we agreed to full communion we did not specify, in advance, everything we will eventually have to decide. We all know that sometimes the journey to get somewhere is more important than the place at which we arrive. How we travel with each other and how we awaken each other's imagination is more important than the particular shape we give our institutions at any given point in history.

I am often asked to speculate on the shape of things to come, now that we are in full communion. What people really want to know is whether the Lutheran Church will begin to look more Anglican or *vice versa*. What I reply is that I cannot predict the future because, as we journey together, we will stimulate each other's imagination, and what will emerge will be a new thing that neither of us has presently seen or embodied. In other things we will simply share, each giving

the other parts of ourselves as gifts. Who we are is not a static condition: it is shaped by the times we encounter and the companions who accompany us.

Our Churches are shaped by the Holy Spirit, who calls us through the Gospel to be the people of God. Martin Luther's Small Catechism says of the third Article of the Apostles Creed, "I cannot by my own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the one true faith." The church is not our possession. The church is the creation of God, shaped on the move as its people live out their calling amid the changing times of world history. Whenever someone tries to solidify a particular expression of the church and declare that expression to be the ultimate sacred shape, the Holy Spirit will open the ears of someone with imagination to hear the needs of that generation looking to be the church for the bread of new life. The solid will begin to melt, and a new shape will emerge which responds to the hunger for the Gospel being expressed by the people of that place and time.

That's what I celebrate when our Church commemorates the Reformation. It is, for me, a feast of the Holy Spirit who does not let our obsession with building towers of Babel interfere with the joyous evangelical mission of Christ to declare release to the captives, vision to the blind, healing to the sick, and joy to the broken-hearted.

The story of the people of God, as we have it captured in our Scriptures, is the story of a people on the move. It begins in a garden and ends in a city. An ancient Hebrew creed says, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor." The ancient saga includes a sojourn in Egypt and an exile in Babylon. Israel becomes the vassal state of Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. Those Jews who follow Jesus soon find themselves outnumbered by Gentiles, who fall into a captivity centuries long – although they do not know it at the time they celebrate Constantine making Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. It is only when the politics of the empire co-opts the church into its ambitions and divisions, that the darkness is revealed. The Churches of the East and of the West go separate ways. The Church of the West fragments into sixteenth century divisions of Lutherans, Calvinist, Anabaptist, and Anglican expressions. It's the story of the Tower of Babel all over again.

However, in each of these apparent disasters someone among God's people saw the light in the midst of darkness, and rediscovered the calling of the Spirit to proclaim the unconditional love of God to those who were hungry to receive it.

When I was a boy, I think I believed that the Lutheran Church had supplanted the Church of Rome. Even though we were a small community and the Roman one was huge, I believed it would be only a matter of time until God would give us our due and topple the giant. How little I knew about the immensity of God's grace! In the space and time God put between our Churches we learned to surrender our chauvinism and speak to each other about our desire for restored communion. Lutherans and Roman Catholics have come to common agreement on the very doctrine which caused the divide of the Reformation.

When I reviewed those condemnations of the sixteenth century which led to the irreconcilable differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, I was amazed that they had not been able to settle them. They weren't that complicated. But I was looking at them through the eyes of the present, in which many things have changed because of our experiences on the journey.

While I believe that our coming to full communion is an end in itself, so that the children of God might be one, it is also only the beginning of a call to share in one mission. History has handed us an opportunity in the upcoming generation of youth in this country. Our youth have been parented and grand-parented by people who have sought fulfilment in secular materialism. The Baby Boomers tried to be hippies and other idealists who dreamed of changing Western society, but they degenerated into establishmentarians in business suits and corporate offices. The children of the Boomers became more entrepreneurial, but their value systems were extremely self-centred. Both generations ceased participation in the church. The Boomers at least knew which Church it was they didn't attend; the *Gen X-ers* couldn't tell one from another. Neither of those generations has spoken to their children about personal faith and belief – even those who have remained in the church. What they have shown their children is that their materialist achievements have not brought them peace of spirit.

And so the young are curious and open. They are good kids ready for God to show them a new way of life. At the same time, they have

inherited a pluralist world. Every religious idea is equal to every other in their world. None stands out. They hunt and peck, snip and paste, the same way they write school papers using material they find on the Internet.

Here lies the calling of the Spirit: to share the gospel with a generation that is hungry for it out of sheer spiritual malnutrition.

Here lies the challenge: will we do this simply because they need it, or because we desperately want to refill our declining churches?

Here comes the reforming: the questions our youth ask will be in words and concepts we do not presently understand. We are particularists in a pluralist landscape; they are surfers on a dimensionless sea. We are landlubbers, they are mariners. In order for us to hear their questions, we will have to learn a new vocabulary and become familiar with a religious inventory that comes from unfamiliar communities most of us have never visited.

Yet our newest generation values friendships with a passion, and our young people hope to have enduring marriages and families. That is the land on which they hope to build their homes. We have the gifts to help them build those homes. Community through communion is a way of describing ourselves. We teach an understanding of love that is not a transient feeling, but an enduring policy of meeting the needs of the other. We worship a God who reshapes religious communities, so that they can serve the Spirit's ends.

Our poetry is full of images of the God who does these things: God is a potter. God is a mother giving birth. God is the new-born child. God is a whirlwind. God is utter silence.

These are images of life-changing experiences. Some call for submission of the will, others call for a new plan of action. God asks us to sit in dark silence and listen, God asks us to gird up our loins and get going. But whatever God asks will not be shaped by our need for order. God is always driven by the passionate desire to love every one of us with an unconditional fondness that defies reason and practicality. That is why we keep needing reformation. Institution-builders are practical rationalists. God is Don Quixote dreaming the impossible dream.

The dreams I have for you, my Lord,
are only a shadow of the dreams you have for me;
only a shadow of all that will be,
if I but follow you.²

Notes

- ¹ In 2001 both the National Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada and the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada adopted “The Waterloo Declaration” which declared the two Churches to be in “full communion” with one another. See the Introduction above for details.
- ² Carey Landrey, “Only A Shadow,” published in *Glory and Praise: Parish Music Programs* (Phoenix, Arizona: North American Liturgy Resources, 1984).