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## HISTORICAL SERIES, 9

### Unity of the Spirit

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*(Editor's Note: The Rev. Michael J. Pryse is the second Bishop of the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, having begun that ministry in 1998. Prior to that he had served as an Assistant to the Bishop of the Eastern Synod, the Rev. William D. Huras, from 1990 to 1998. This sermon was preached at the opening service of the Synod's biennial Assembly in 2004, held at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario.)*

#### **Texts: Isaiah 2:2-4; Acts 1:6-11; Luke 10:1-12, 17-20**

Every two years, for a few brief days, the Eastern Synod physically comes together and meets as a family. We assemble as an ecclesial community to meet and do the things that are essential to the maintenance of our continued fellowship with one another.

As with all family gatherings, we no doubt come with mixed feelings. Some of us love these things! We've been poring through our bulletin of reports and reviewing the agenda for several weeks. We're excited to be here! Others of us have come more out of a sense of obligation or duty - the churchly equivalent of being dragged out to a family reunion by our parents or spouses! And then there are some of us who just don't bother showing up at all!

At most family reunions we encounter the usual cast of characters. There'll be Cousin Louie the know-it-all whom you always end up stuck beside at the dining room table. Aunt Marge the incorrigible cheek pincher. Feeble-minded Uncle Fred who's always dragging you off to hear the same bad jokes he told you last year. Yes, they'll all be there.

But so will your father-in-law Harold whose table graces can mystically silence our boisterous babbling with the quiet embrace of a holy hush. Great Aunt Mary whose belly laughs can coax a cheery

disposition out of the gloomiest of the family members. Cousin Sue who's never met a baby whose colicky cries she couldn't magically quiet. They'll all be there. And their churchly equivalents will all be here at this gathering. That's just the way it is with families.

Like many of you, I've been dragged muttering and fuming to a goodly number of family reunions. (I'm much more of an "I" on the Myers-Briggs than most people would recognize!) Yet, invariably, once I do get there I get caught up in the whole thing. It might take a while, but eventually that wonderful feeling of connectedness kicks in. I start to feel glad and thankful that I came. I come to recognize how important it is that this group of people chooses to come together. I realize how much I value being a part of this special community and how much that community means to me.

Our biennial gatherings meet a similar collective need for our Synodical family – a need that is given poignant illustration in the readings that have been chosen for this evening's service.

We gather, once again, to affirm the hopes and dreams that inspire our common life. "Swords into ploughshares; spears into pruning hooks." No, we know we're not there yet – not by a long shot - but the vision is re-articulated and we remind one another that we're still committed to working toward its completion, still committed to being on the way together.

We sing our family songs and join the psalmist in praising God for all the blessings we have received. We pass around the photo albums. We re-tell family stories of old. We remember and give thanks for God's continued faithfulness to us and thereby re-tune our senses so that those blessings might be better discerned today. We remind ourselves that we are never alone, re-calling, as does the reading from Acts, that the Holy Spirit is always with us, both in our gathered and dispersed states.

Two years ago, like the seventy in the Gospel reading, we were sent out with new hopes and dreams about how we might express the life of this family in our various individual contexts. And now we have come back together to check in and catch up on what's happened. We will celebrate that which has been done, and lament that which has been left undone. We will dream new dreams and hatch new plans, all the while knowing that, in a few short days, we will again be sent off to become the face, hands, and feet of this wider church community in the various places, communities, and contexts from which we have come. We gather, only to disperse.

And each member of the family bears some measure of responsibility as to how - or even whether - all that happens. Each of us will have a part in determining this gathering's net effect upon the life of our family, whether it will enliven or diminish, build up or tear down. Will swords be turned into ploughshares or ploughshares into swords? Will our coming together further contribute to the spirit of despair that characterizes so much of human life today, or will we leave this place bearing newly ripened fruits of the Spirit to share for the world's salvation? These are the questions that each of us will help to answer in our own ways.

In one of his commentaries on the letter to the Romans, Luther writes: "This life, therefore, is not righteousness but growth in righteousness; not health but healing; not being but becoming; not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. We are always in motion, and we who are righteous need always to be made more righteous. For there is no stopping place on God's way."

Self-righteousness is never a becoming vestment, regardless of who is wearing it. We're all "on the way"; none of us has fully arrived. We're like [Ontario highway] 401, both individually and collectively: we're always under construction! Like it or not, the family that has formed and shaped us is itself still being formed and shaped into something new. It simply can't be avoided, because to experience the grace of God means that we will, by necessity, be changed. For God's grace cannot - and does not - leave us where it finds us. It always takes us - and always makes us - into something new.

Is that good news? Absolutely! But it's also unsettling and challenging news because it means that no one of us can see the way forward with total and complete precision, no matter how great or strong our faith may be. It means that we can never abandon the hard and challenging work of shared discernment; that we will continue to struggle with different visions and different understandings of what this family is all about, different articulations of what God is calling us to do and be in each phase of our life. That's just the way it is, in this or any other family, and nothing we can say, do, or think will make that reality go away.

In a few short minutes we will experience another family ritual when we share in the feast of the Lord's table. It's a deeply significant action for the life of any family, for it is at table that we experience

our fundamental essence. Something magical happens when we share the primary experiences of eating and drinking with one another. I don't think it's simply co-incidence that Jesus spent so much time eating and drinking with people and that the ultimate memorial to his life and death is experienced in the context of a meal.

When we come to the Lord's table we receive a new identity that transcends all of the quirks and peculiarities that are present within our family and within each one of us as individuals - a new identity that isn't based on what we do or don't do, what we think or don't think, what we have or don't have, but upon the foundation of who God says we are in Christ Jesus. All come as guests, hungry and thirsty, eager to receive at the table of the Lord. All are united in the welcoming embrace of a host whose fundamental and primary essence is love.

Our table talk this week may well be vigorous and boisterous, and our opinions expressed with great passion. But even as we valiantly seek a "unity of opinion" on difficult questions, we must never forget to celebrate, nurture, and care for the greater and infinitely more important "unity of the Spirit" that is already ours at this table. It is God's gift, pure and simple – a gift we can't create or manufacture, but a gift we can certainly dispose ourselves either to receive or not receive. May God grant us the grace and willingness to be grateful recipients. Amen.