

The Blessing of Being
An Annual Pastoral Letter to the Congregation
at Sts. Peter and Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church of Riverside
from Dennis J. Lauritsen, pastor
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany of Our Lord, January 30th, 2011

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her (Luke 10:38-42, ESV).

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"To the church of God that is [at Sts. Peter and Paul], to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy ones together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 1:2; paraphrase).

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" asks the prophet Micah in our stead today, ". . . He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"(Micah 6:6, 8).

There once was a young rabbi who discovered that he had a serious problem in his new congregation shortly after his arrival. During the Friday evening *Shabbat* service, he noticed that about half the congregation stood for the prayers and about half remained seated. And he was alarmed when each side began shouting at the other, insisting that theirs was the right *tradition* for prayer. It seemed that there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that the young rabbi could say or do that would resolve the conflict in this his very first congregation. Finally, in desperation, the rabbi sought out the 99-year-old founder of the synagogue who, by this time, was living in a nursing home. There, at the aged rabbi's bedside, the younger man poured out his troubled soul.

"So, tell me," he pleaded with the older rabbi, "was it the tradition for the congregation to *stand* during the prayers?"

"Oh, no," came the answer from the old rabbi, "that was *not* the tradition."

"I see," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to *sit* during the prayers?"

"No, no," answered the old rabbi again, "it was *not* the tradition to sit during the prayers."

"Well," the young rabbi responded, "what we have in the congregation these days is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Oh, yes," remembered the old rabbi, "yes, *that* was the tradition."

Neither are we always so sure at Sts. Peter and Paul just exactly what is our tradition, having come to this congregation from many and very diverse traditions, including, but not limited to, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Evangelical, Methodist, Orthodox, Episcopalian, Covenant, Pentecostal churches; and many who have come from little or no religious tradition at all. We have come here from all sorts of religious and cultural, ethnic and economic, social and generational backgrounds, who often have little experience and less understanding of each

others' traditions. We are a motley crew, if truth be told, who would never be caught dead together on a Saturday night, but who have been caught alive together in the broad fishing net of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit." And thanks be to God that, among our many traditions, we do not number standing and shouting, or sitting and screaming at each other, not even at monthly Council meetings.

Tradition! Whether you like it or not, whether you are willing to admit it or not, given enough time, we all have our traditions that we love and to which we cling. Just think for a moment about the traditions—the songs, the candles, the food, the lights, the gatherings, the decorations—that you associate with Christmas just past. If you forget to sing a hymn, or change the hour of opening the gifts, or decide to dress differently for the liturgy, or leave out a special dish from the Christmas Eve meal, well, you can expect to hear about it.

Tradition! Remember Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*? . . . No? "A fiddler on the roof," Tevye ponders, "Sounds crazy, no? But here, in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. . . . It isn't easy. You may ask 'Why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous?' Well, we stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance?" Tevye asks the audience, "That I can tell you in one word: *Tradition!* Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as . . . as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!"

We middle-aged Americans, those of us who were raised in the church during the 1960s and 70s on folk masses, accompanied by acoustic guitars, and forever singing "Kumbayah," are rather unlikely to agree with Tevye that *tradition* is what keeps us from tumbling off the roof. After all, we in our young American culture were labeled decades ago by our elder European cousins as "neophyles," that is, people with a fetish for anything that is new. I am reminded of the passage in the Acts of the Apostles, recounting the day when the Apostle Paul preached at the Areopagus in Athens where Luke tells us, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:19, 22). Tradition is old, we mid-lifers think, we like new; though much younger people, generations after us, are actually said to be attracted, even fascinated, by tradition as it is expressed in the liturgies of the Orthodox and Anglican Churches, even the Tridentine Latin masses of the Roman Catholic Church. (We have some parents and grandparents in the congregation who can affirm this.)

As many of you know, we in the church have just concluded another Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Some of our congregations in Riverside and North Riverside observed this week by getting better acquainted with the *traditions* of our various denominations by participating in a pulpit and table exchange last Sunday. As you may know, this particular week begins every year on the Confession of St. Peter (January 18th) and ends on the

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Conversion (or Call) of St. Paul (January 25th). Traditionally, St. Peter has represented the apostolic mission to the Jewish people and St. Paul the mission to the gentiles (i.e., nations). And we are very blessed to be part of a congregation that bears the names of these two premier apostles, reminding us of the gospel mission to “the ends of the earth” and the fullness of time.

While Pastor Jansen from the Presbyterian Church was with you, I had the privilege of worshiping with our brothers and sisters at the Methodist Church, just a few steps down Woodside, where about a dozen of us gathered in the Tope Room, very similar to our Friendship Room. There we worshiped beneath a carved, wooden cross and a portrait of Jesus praying in Gethsemane. Most of us sat on comfy couches and overstuffed chairs while a blaze arose from the fireplace and the sound of those heart-warming, Wesleyan hymns filled the room. I’m thinking this description should be enough to send most of you off to the Methodists next Sunday to get yourselves warmed up.

To observe a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is also to recognize the reality that often we are anything but one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. In fact, the reality of the church often appears as one of unholy divisions, even within our own denominations, especially we American Lutherans, as we sing in the hymn about the church,

“sore oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.” And yet, the church remains, always on the move, a means of the holy gospel, a divine creation of God through the Holy Spirit of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

The chimes are a public call to worship, a call to be at prayer with the gathered people of God, and a sign of our own tolling hearts as we are sent to summon others into the great fishing net of God’s love in Jesus.

It occurred to me, preaching in front of that fireplace, that maybe the more important question is not really *how* we worship, whether we stand and shout, or sit and scream; whether we sing Lutheran chorales or use lots of incense; whether the hymns are accompanied by a sixty-rank pipe organ or by a set of simple bongos; whether prayers of

intercession are spontaneous or prepared ahead of time.

We all have our traditions that we prize, and we ought to share them, enjoy them, receive them, affirm them, learn from them, and have our lives enriched by the power of the Holy Spirit speaking through all these wonderful, diverse traditions. One of the beauties of this congregation (one that I experience anyway), is the abundant sharing of talents, gifts and traditions that people who are new to the congregation have been so willing to take the risk to share, and then to have these received by others.

However, I thought last Sunday, maybe the more important question is not necessarily *how* we worship but rather *why* we worship at all. I think part of the answer to the question “why worship?” lies within one of the words we use for worship, that is, “liturgy” (from the Greek, *leiturgia*) which can be translated literally as the “service of the people” or, more simply, “public service.” Sometimes I like to call liturgy “worship as witness,” done for the benefit, not of a single congregation, but for the benefit of the public, the *publicus*, the people. Liturgy is not a club meeting or gathering of like-minded friends. This is why we toll the bells at hours of worship, not just to grab the attention of those of us inside the church, but to announce to the public, surrounding us in our communities, that it is also time for them to worship either here at the corner of 31st and DesPlaines in Riverside or with another congregation. The chimes are a public call to worship, a call to be at prayer with the gathered people of God, and a

sign of our own tolling hearts as we are sent to summon others into the great fishing net of God's love in Jesus.

Recently I had the opportunity to greet a woman who was worshiping here for the first time. She thanked me profusely for the warm welcome she had received from the congregation and for what had been a very meaningful worship experience for her, even on a low, cold Sunday in January when everybody was away from church getting ready for a Bears game at noon. Then she said, "You know, I've just recently moved into the neighborhood with my daughter, and I just love hearing the chimes from this church at noon and in the evening. I haven't been to church in a long, long time," she explained, "but when I heard the church bells, I just felt that they were calling me back to the Lord." Sometimes, you know, it's the things you are hardly aware of that can draw others to Jesus—just the sound of the chimes that most of you never hear.

Worship as witness, I've noticed, naturally happens during the summer months when our congregation worships outdoors where we are among the people, where the public better understands that worship is for their benefit, whether they walk across the street to sing with us, or simply listen to the Word from a patio recliner, or moan about the "noise" from the under the covers. It would seem right, then, that we need to pray more frequently in such public spaces as did Paul when he preached in the *agoras* (the marketplaces) and Areopagus (the place of debates) in ancient Athens (cf., Acts 15).

I learned recently that the English word for "worship" comes from the older word "woerthscripe" which means "to ascribe worth." In the liturgy what humans hold valuable is revealed. When you come to church, when you are attentive to the Word, when you receive the Lord's Supper, when you sing the hymns, when you meditate quietly, when you pray the prayers, when you do all these things, you are saying that this is what is valuable and worthwhile for you. And when this does not happen, you are saying to me, your pastor, who has been charged with the stewardship of these things, and to your congregation, that worship and the rest of us have little or no worth or value for you.

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You see, worship does not attempt to cultivate and shape God but to cultivate and shape the congregation and the world in which the congregation lives. "You turn things upside down!" remarks the prophet Isaiah, "Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, 'He did not make me'; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?" (Isaiah 29:16).

The good of worship is to be done, not to God but to humans, in that words of life and death and resurrection to eternal life will be said to us. What serves life is communicated to human beings in the liturgy. This is God's favor toward human beings. In a word, worship is not doing; worship is being. And what happens on Sunday morning is not just another thing to do on our long list of things that we think have to be done. What happens on Sunday morning, if we will allow for it to happen, is the opportunity to receive the *blessing of being* with the Lord and his

people. Simply put, God wants to have a word with us. God wants to talk to us. The question for me is, Are we willing just *to be*? Are we willing *to be here* as clay in the hands of “the Potter who forms us?”

Many of us are willing to be here, for a part of the public service anyway, but only if “I have something *to do*,” like serve as a greeter, read the lessons, attend a meeting, sing in the choir, or remember a departed loved one in the prayer of the church. But here’s my question again, Why not be here to receive the *blessing of being*? Why not be here to be shaped in the hands of “the Potter who forms us?” Don’t you already have enough to do?

A sentence from Martin Luther’s sermon at the dedication of the castle church in Torgau in October 1544 says plainly that the new church should be so used “that nothing else may ever happen in it except that our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise.” In worship, the faithful encounter God: they have conversation face-to-face.

I am told that many churches in Central and Eastern Europe are constructed with only a sanctuary—no social halls, no dining rooms, no gyms, no Friendship Rooms, no offices, not even restrooms. The only thing you do when you come to church is be—be in the presence of the triune God, to hear the Word, to receive the sacraments, to pray and to praise. When you come to church you are to be—to be at worship. No business. No meetings. No money counting. No gossip at coffee hour. No fixing things. There is literally no room in these churches for anything but the blessing of being.

It follows from what I have said thus far that the challenge for all Christian churches is to offer a living experience of the Lord Jesus here in the present instead of the generic religious experience of various culture-oriented understandings of spirituality such as are rampant among the generic, so-called community churches. Christian worship is not generically “spiritual” but ought to bring one in contact with Jesus and his Spirit.

So, liturgical action is the interruption of all action so that the passive righteousness of humans before God becomes dominant. In the liturgy, the human crosses the boundary

from doing to being, leading us out of the kingdom of results into the kingdom of freedom where being comes before action. In salutation and greeting, in words and music, in symbols and sacraments, even in the parish announcements and the offering we speak with God and God with us. Thus worship is different from all the other activities of the congregation (care of souls, education, nurture, stewardship, fellowship, administration, charitable service, missions and outreach). The dialogue with God, the prayerful attitude, the congregation at worship, stand at the forefront of it all. (Here I am indebted to Michael Meyer-Blanck for his fine article entitled, “The Active

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Passivity of Faith, Art, and Liturgy” which appeared in the Winter 2009 edition of *The Lutheran Forum*.) As I have said in previous years, if the Word is leading, everything else will follow, including programs, ministries, organizations, budgets, offerings, events, etc., all of which are really no more than servants of the gospel, and there they should remain. “And where is the Church?” the Lutheran reformers were asked. They wrote, “The Church is the

congregation of saints wherein the Word is taught in its purity and the sacraments administered rightly” (Augsburg Confession, Article 7).

It is here at worship, during Sabbath rest, that the human crosses *the boundary from doing to being*, leading us out of *the kingdom of results into the kingdom of freedom*. So much of the church, especially annual meetings like the one today, is focused on results. How many programs? How many new members? How much money? How much are we *doing*? But here, in the church, the *blessing of being* comes before the *blessing of doing*. Prayer comes before labor. We Lutherans ought to know by now that “we hold that one is justified by faith [being] apart from works of the law [doing]” (Romans 3:28). This is the heart of so much of St. Paul’s correspondence and the source of the 16th century Reformation.

Some of you know that often when I have a vacation Sunday and our family is in town, we worship at the Episcopal (Anglo-Roman) Church here in Riverside near Central School. When we have attended during the summer months, there are usually no more than thirty or forty people. The sanctuary small and welcoming, and after several

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visits, we have not heard the Rector preach. But we go to St. Paul Church because there is a prayerful attitude in the foreground. One is aware of the tremendous mystery (*mysterium tremendum*) of the Almighty God. The congregation gathers in silence. Incense fills the room with the smell of prayer. Great care and preparation is given by the ministers to the liturgy. Musicians serve to assist the congregation in singing the hymns. One has a sense of the mystical body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. I experience this as the blessing of being—being in worship.

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words to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). We have accepted the challenge of the Letter to the Hebrews which asks that we “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24). I am deeply grateful that the Holy Spirit through this congregation has been “stirring [us] up to love and good works.” “For we are his workmanship,” says Ephesians, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Similarly, First Timothy reminds us that “[We] are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (6:18). We as a congregation have welcomed and are receiving the blessing of doing.

I hope and pray for this congregation that we also will welcome and receive the blessing of being with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in worship, study, meditation, prayer, conversation, and reaching others with the saving gospel of Jesus. I think this is what Jesus was getting at when he went to share a meal at the home of Martha and Mary. Remember, Mary sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. She received the blessing of being while

“Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to serve alone?’ . . . But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her’” (Luke 10:38-42). There is the blessing of doing. There is the greater blessing of being.

The Book of Acts says about the early church, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). In the Beatitudes, Jesus does not say that those who “do” are blessed, but those who simply “are.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are those who mourn . . . Blessed are the meek . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. . . Blessed are the merciful. . . Blessed are the pure in heart. . . Blessed are the peacemakers. . . Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. . . .” (Matthew 5:2-11).

As a congregation, maybe the first question we need to ask on this day of our annual meeting is not what more we need to do for Jesus’ sake but how we need more to be with Jesus—in being present at worship to listen to what God has to say to us and gladly to receive that Word; in being grateful and interceding in our prayers; in reading and studying the Scriptures in conversation with others; in being fully present for the mutual consolation of each other in the fellowship; in being near to the Lord’s presence in “the breaking of the bread” and the pouring of the cup in the Holy Communion; in being present to our bishop, synod and denomination as partners in the mission of the church that reaches beyond the congregation; in being present to our children and young people to assist with the formation and nurture of their faith.

This is liturgy. This is worship (*woerthscripe*). This is genuine public service. This is coming to know our Lord and the language of faith in order that we may more fully give witness to him and call others into relationship with him. I suppose this is why Martin Luther liked to say that “the church is not a fortress of the perfect but a hospital for sinners,” echoing the very words of Jesus: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

So, we heard last Sunday that “large crowds” began to follow Jesus, people “who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, the epileptics and the paralytics,” people walking in darkness who were longing for the light, people longing for radical change in their lives. Surely, you must know people like these. “I have come,” Jesus announces, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. . . I have come to call them.” By his own goodness and mercy he calls us and gathers us with those who hear the chimes ringing from this church and who may also hear the chimes ringing from our hearts.

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Your brother in Christ,
Dennis J. Lauritsen, pastor