

## From the Pastor's Desk

### **Part Mystery and Part Mess** *Unity over uniformity in the church.*

(This article is taken from the August issue of *The Lutheran Magazine* and was written by Pastor Peter Marty. My comments can be found at the end. ~ PB)

Something in human nature has us wanting to be around other people who resemble us. We make strenuous efforts to group ourselves with people who like the same things we do. There is, of course, nothing wrong with banding together with like-minded people. It just happens to suit the formation of a political party better than it does Christ's church. It aligns more closely with a club where one pays dues than a fellowship of forgiven sinners who ponder deep realities.

Those who give it a serious piece of their lives quickly discover that the church is often 51 percent mystery and 49 percent mess. They also find out that no matter how flawed the individuals within it may be, the church still happens to be the garden of God's grace. Adherents begin to delight in this strange menagerie of people who often come from a dizzying variety of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives.

"A Christian congregation is the least specialized gathering of human beings on the planet," said Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian pastor and author. "Where else can you find yourself bracketed by nursing infants on one side, nodding octogenarians on the other, and rubbing shoulders with so many people whom you acknowledge, however grudgingly, as brothers and sisters, and with whom you have nothing in common except your common humanity ... and God."

The significance and risk of this togetherness is too much for some. Plenty of people take one look and opt out. They prefer believing in themselves, or at least more in their own story. Free-lance discipleship sounds a lot better than attaching oneself to some older story, however wiser it may be. Who wants to trust in a God whom they can't see? For individuals who can't handle the nature of this faith journey, there is always ad-hoc living. A make-up-your-own-spirituality-every-day sounds more tantalizing than hanging around some unholy assortment of people who refer to themselves as Christ's body.

For those of us who bend our lives around God's decision to be the head of this odd-shaped body, Christian community delivers incredible joy and meaning. We find something extraordinarily beautiful in following a light that is brighter than the flicker of our own little light.

We discover through the foibles and faith of one another that we become better people than if we were left merely to ourselves. In fact, we learn that a truly spirit-filled community is one where we can come as we are, yet be loved into being who we get to become. We gather in our inadequacy, yet scatter with new boldness. Anything less means something is probably amiss.

Healthy cells in a body always function with their own unique purpose, yet in interdependent fashion. Cancer cells are the only ones that insist on being independent and autonomous. True Christian community prizes this same interdependence that is at work in our bodies. People who believe the answer to their deepest need comes from outside themselves cherish this interdependence. They begin to count on the provocative idea that church is the primary expression of the embodiment of God.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer liked to speak of the *privilege* of being in active fellowship with believers who are different. His words helpfully suggest that there is more than one way to be authentically Christian. An incomparable joy arises when people of faith recognize the image of God in those who aren't constructed exactly in their image. We might say, "Blessed are those who do not leave a church simply to find one where everyone else thinks like they do."

Jesus' new commandment on the last night of his life wasn't a promotion of tribal solidarity or like-mindedness. His interest was the bringing together of followers on the basis of something other than complete agreement. "Love one another just as I have loved you" (John 13:34.) There is no mention of agreement with one another. His own spirit and love would be the basis of unity — not some neat ideological conformity.

So where do we find this unity in the church? We find it in a love that is born when people believe more in God and each other than in themselves. It is God helping flawed people breathe grace together.

\*\*\*

*While I agree with most of Pastor Marty's article, it is also true that some members of congregations no longer find them a compelling place to gather for reasons other than, as Marty said, "Believing in themselves". People drift away from churches for a variety of reasons and not all are their fault. Churches can sometimes be emotionally unhealthy places where attending brings more pain than peace.*

*During our family reunion in North Dakota last month, we walked around our old neighborhood where we were raised many years ago. The church we attended was being remodeled and we went in to take a look. On the front door were the words: "Welcome Home". The problem with "Home" is they can sometimes be dysfunctional and when returning one can find that little has changed.*

*Some drift away from church because of differences about theology, social justice issues, or struggles with relationships, but they will probably find similar challenges in other congregations. And there are others who no longer find church to capture their imaginations and it becomes relevant to their lives.*

*Recently, I asked some people what takes away their sense of God's peace. One replied, "Watching the news". I think most would agree. We see such polarization today within our society and it is reaching the point where faith communities suffer and politically, we are no longer able to properly govern ourselves. The black and white world of fundamentalism can be a scourge to both religion and politics alike. It engenders hate, hinders compromise, and if left unchecked will result in violence, which was recently so sadly witnessed in Norway where Islamophobia resulted in the murder of nearly 80 people.*

*Rising above the fray demands that we see our baptism as grounding us more deeply than our particular religion, social status, ethnicity or political affiliation. We are first and foremost sisters and brothers in Christ. We are grounded in the love and compassion of Jesus Christ and this is our common denominator where we find unity in the midst of diversity.*

*Healthy congregations welcome diversity, but it takes a fair amount of spiritual and emotional maturity for individuals to accept it. On the Home Page of our website, it states:*

Dear Friends,

We welcome you to our inclusive faith community; living together in trust and hope, we seek to live daily in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A faith community is an environment where people can enter into meaningful relationships and experience dynamic worship. It is a place where spiritual and emotional wounds are healed as people progress toward wholeness and holiness. A healthy faith community does not seek conformity, but welcomes diversity. It embraces questions and celebrates mystery. From a faith community, Christ's hands, feet and voice become manifest—the Gospel is preached, outcasts are welcomed, the poor are fed and clothed, children are taught and adults seek to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

This is what Shepherd of the Hills is all about. Come join us and celebrate God's never-ending love and mercy.

*In churches today, membership is broadening to include more than what happens on Sunday mornings. In the Great Commission, Jesus did not say: "Go and attend church services on Sunday mornings", as important as that is. He said, "Go and make disciples ..." We have been sent out into the world, which is to say, into Canon City and beyond to gather people together who have a desire to embark on a journey of centering their lives on God, which is most commonly done in community with others who have a similar vision.*

*Our faith community needs to broaden its scope and provide a wide variety of opportunities for worship, education, small group discussion and fellowship. This can occur in a church, a private home, a coffee house or even a bar where we, as Pastor Marty said, "Ponder deep realities" and learn from those who may be vastly different than ourselves.*

*God is doing new things these days and we long to be a part of what he is up to.*

~ PB