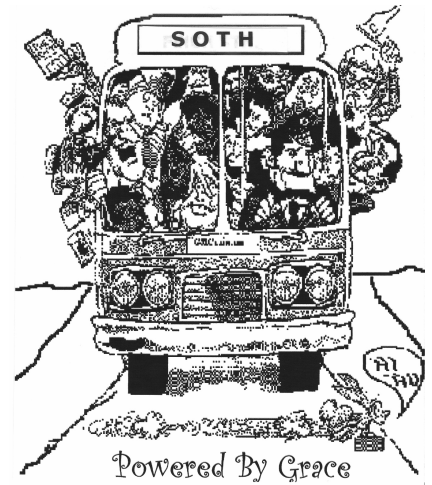


The Journey Continues

Last year we took a summer trip on Shepherd of the Hills' bus, "Powered By Grace" up to Cottonwood Pass and beyond. It was an exciting trip where we learned what the ELCA teaches about topics such as: Grace; The Church's Involvement in Politics; Salvation; The Bible—What Is It?; The Bible and Metaphor; Professing catholic; and Beyond Belief To Relationship. You can review last summer's journey by going to our web site www.sothlutheran.com and clicking on "Lutheranism 101". We also met some interesting people including: Mrs. Hinklemeier, Hubert Lautenschlager (chairperson of the church council), Joshua (hitchhiker), Hans Engelbertson, Mildred Reisenhouser (wife of Raymond who died after 52 years of marriage), John Picard (the scientist seeking religious views compatible with modern science), Elmer 'two-step' Inkfisk (choir director), and no Lutheran trip is complete without a visit with Ole and Lena.



Powered By Grace was stored in Hans Engelbertson's large garage all winter. When Hans and Pastor Bob went to get it they found it covered with dust and cobwebs. Powered By Grace prefers to be used and not left in storage. Grace is eager to do what it was given to do: Lead people where they are transformed in the midst of life's blessings and challenges. We are learning that Grace never abandons us and to trust in its gentle guidance.

For this trip members have decided to head toward Pagossa Springs and plan on stopping along the way at the Great Sand Dunes National Park. They are in no hurry and enjoy a leisurely pace that allows them to become better acquainted with each other and learn about their faith. The bus is full of fuel and at nearly \$4.00 per gallon we are fortunate grace is free and abundant. The only cost of riding in Powered By Grace is a willingness to let go of control, enter the unknown, and trust in God's guidance. This is easier said than done. Although our destination is Pagossa Springs, you never know for sure where you will end up when you are led by God's grace. Not everyone feels comfortable riding on such a bus.

Powered By Grace's 10,000 horsepower engine idled quietly as people boarded. We have over 400 seats and lots of room to pick up travelers along the way. Our membership is diverse with people young and old, rich and poor, male and female, conservative and liberal with various ethnicities and religious backgrounds represented. The beauty of Shepherd of the Hills' congregation is the wide variety of people who together make up the Body of Christ in this part of the Lord's vineyard.

As they were boarding, Pastor overheard Ole saying to Lena, "I don't know if I like all dees different people. I tink it would be better if everyone vas yust like me." Pastor said to Ole, "If everyone was just like you, life wouldn't be very exciting would it Ole?" "I guess not", Ole said. When they sat down, Lena leaned up and said to Pastor, "You'll have to forgive Ole. He hasn't been feeling very well. I took him to the doctor the other day and he said to Ole: 'For laboratory testing, I vill need a stool and urine sample from you'." "Ole vas hard of hearing", Lena said, "So he asked me, 'What did the doctor say?' I leaned over and spoke loudly in his hear: 'The doctor says he needs to see your undervear'. "You know," Lena said, "Ole is getting up in age and rather forgetful. A few days ago I saw him valking around the house with a Preparation H suppository sticking out of his ear. I'm afraid to ask him where he put his hearing aide."

The Problem of Evil

As Powered By Grace left Canon City, Mildred Reisenhouser commented to Pastor, "Isn't it sad what happened in Myanmar where thousands were killed by the cyclone and now we hear the death toll from the earthquake in China may be as many a 150,000 or more. Many of them were children in school when it struck. Why does God allow such bad things to happen? If God is in charge of everything, why didn't he stop it?"

“That’s a tough question”, Pastor said, “Bad things happening to good people has caused many to question God’s existence, which is understandable. Ultimately, ‘God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them.’ ^{1 John 4:16} Those who claim to explain the mystery of why this loving God allows evil to happen open their mouths only to change feet.”

“It’s important to distinguish between suffering inflicted by people and suffering that is referred to as an ‘Act of God’. Suffering such as the Nazi regime in Germany, and more recently, terrorists who randomly kill, is imposed by people who are full of hate. Still, some would say that if God is all-powerful he could stop people from doing such evil acts. I remember a woman saying to me when Pope John Paul II was shot in 1981, ‘I can’t believe he was shot. I thought God would stop it from happening.’” “But”, I said, “God never pulled the trigger. Mehmet Ali Agca did. God did not interfere with his freewill. It’s been estimated that over 100 million people have been killed by other people in wars during the last century. These deaths were caused, not by God, but by people and nations who hated one another.”

During one of our OWLS meetings several months ago, we discussed this topic and someone suggested that perhaps something went wrong with the human brain during the process of evolution and it become defective. An argument in favor of this view is that human beings are the only species capable of mass murder and genocide. Other animals kill to eat or to protect themselves or their young. Humans, during their darkest hours, have attempted to kill entire races of people simply because they hated them. So, is there a deformity within the human brain that causes such evil? In religious terms, we have called this ‘original sin’. I wish I could say baptism remedies this, but unfortunately baptized Christians are often the ones perpetuating the killing and it’s sometimes religiously motivated. Luther was correct when he said we are both saint and sinner at the same time.

I think the key for stopping this insanity is for people of all races and religions to decide not to harbor anger that so often gives birth to hate. From a heart of anger comes thoughts and words of violence which can lead to the evil that so plagues humanity. In the words of Jesus: “I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.” ^{Matthew 5:22} Jesus seems to be referring to a progression beginning with anger with the penalties increasing as one approaches hate.

Having said this, the question of why God allows humans to inflict evil upon others is still unanswered, as well as “Acts of God”, such as the cyclone in Myanmar or the earthquake in China. Some have used the word “predestination”, which implies that whatever happens, good or evil, is predestined to happen by an all-knowing and all-powerful God. In my view, Predestination turns God into a monster and does nothing to solve this mystery. Luther would say we are trying to understand a mystery that can never be understood and need to be content living with mystery. That makes the most sense to me. “On this side of the grave we see poorly but on the other side we shall see clearly. We know now in part, then we shall know fully.” ^{1 Corinthians 13:12}

Mildred Reisenhouser spoke up and said, “Pastor, I agree that we are dealing with mystery when we consider suffering and other evils. When my dear husband Raymond got sick last year and died a painful death, somehow I found God present in that suffering. In my tears and sometimes even anger, I found an inner peace. As I journeyed with Raymond through the numerous trips to the hospital and finally to his grave, I felt the presence of the crucified Christ.”

“Your faith is a blessing to us all”, Pastor said. “It is true, that the death and resurrection of Jesus has already defeated any evil or suffering we have, or ever will, experience. Death has been swallowed up in victory. ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where is your sting?’” ^{1 Corinthians 15:54-55}

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