

Sermon at the Closing Worship Service
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When we returned from our time in North Borneo/Singapore, I was fortunate to spend a month at Interpreter's House in North Carolina with a man who became a mentor, Dr. Carlyle Marney. I gained much from those weeks and his preaching and writing.....including this opening:

He said after retiring from a regular pulpit ...and later asked to preach at Duke University....

Now that I no longer produce sermons like a weekly run of sausages, you wouldn't believe how involved for me is the process of getting ready to come to you,...for you are entitled to a new, advanced word...and now God has had ample time to give me that word. But it did not come!

And like Marney, I too have sawed, chopped in the woods around Lake Wabedo. I have waited, shoveled, hauled, split, built, read, slept, studied, talked, listened and prayed...but God has been as silent for Marney and me as He was for Elijah on Sinai.

So like him, I have been pushed back on resources:.....people, books, memories and insights I already had. And what has kept me going...my life and times with Dodee in the woods and the world,... and the discovery of Church in some very small ways and places...and the willingness to be open to what is happening in God's universe.

So let me digress 130 years or so, to the simple autobiography of my namesake and Swedish immigrant, (Karl) Charles Amandus Sjostrom:

At the age of twelve I was employed in a match factory for 30 cents a day. A year later, the dearest mother in the world passed away in an epidemic covering the entire city of Kalmar...leaving my carpenter-father with a house full of minor children....the future did not promise much.

It must have been a strange and pitiful sight on the 11th of June...when two youngsters stood at the quay, bags in hand, ready to board the ship to Liverpool and North America.

The farewell to father, family, friends and a home we were never again to enter was not an easy matter.

Such was the story of so many of your ancestors...more than a million and a quarter who came to this new land before it was over.

And what was the situation they left behind? Sweden was a land of poverty and social frustration, population pressure, economic and agricultural hardship, political and religious discontent. And as Oscar Olson has noted:

These founders of the Augustana Church were people of deep religious experience, influenced by evangelical movements and the Spiritual awakening of the Nineteenth century. While holding the faith of the established Church, they were critical of the hierarchy, the formalism of its worship and the worldly spirit of many of its clergy.

In this ‘New Land’ these immigrants met a unique challenge. Here they found religious freedom, but also confusion. Their only resources were faith in their destiny and trust in divine help. Their story is one of men and women weak in wealth, yet strong in faith.

The earliest (not counting the pioneers who came to the banks of the Delaware River in 1638 and later to be absorbed by another denomination) settled from New England to Nebraska. They came to the rolling plains of Western Illinois, to Indiana, Iowa and Lindsborg. Some stopped in New York, others discovered the lakes and pine forests in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, so much like their homeland. From Andover and a little church without stove or steeple, to that organizational meeting in Jefferson Prairie, Wisconsin.

From the preaching of a shoemaker in New Sweden, Iowa in 1848, to the profound words of Tufve Nilsson Hasselquist on that day of organization, June 5, 1860.

Picturing the church and its mission in the world amidst many dangers, he pointed to the final victory in the promise of Jesus: “To Him that overcometh, to him will I give to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.”

So after years of struggles, hardships with land and language, with Norwegians and Episcopalians we are here again to show gratitude for the gifts.

And this heritage called Augustana grew out of the hearts and efforts of these folks to the time when the almost 150 years of its life and mission have been noted by many.

Lyle Schaller, in a letter to the gathering in 1992 sums it up powerfully:

The people of Augustana knew what a church was all about, They balanced doctrine, worship, heritage, celebration, relationships, family, teaching and missions in ideal proportions. I have yet found one that matches it.

But there is a danger in this biannual enjoyment of our common history, this kind of navel gazing or as Luther called it *incurvatus in se*. For there is today, and tomorrow. And we never did set out just to build and be a little church somewhere. We set out to be God’s appeal to our world. And the world today and tomorrow is another ‘New Land’ for us and Christ’s Church!

But how we love to have everything tied down, to hold to moral answers that never change. We have treasured our particular views of ourselves, our surroundings, our race, our religion, our sex, and ideas surrounding all of that,...but again as Marney reminded us: “There is no growth that is Christian without the nerve to submit all my images to correction...That is Christian growth!”

The world around us is no longer a center of frontier individualism. It has become scientifically, sexually, and spiritually different. And we cannot evade the tension. The faith, the Church is in tension.....it is its natural habitat. Tension is the Spirit’s work.

We are in a new time, a new land; people, issues, and responses are different. The way America looked to those early settlers seems like a picnic ground compared to our world in this and future centuries. And our Church today, which has become the new ‘Augustana’ faces a parallel task.

“Any Church that is alive, and true to its Lord,” Ruell Howe told us once, “lives on the edge of heresy.” The Church at rest is the church dying. We must not look for a quiet street away from life’s main currents. It belongs at the crossroads, the frontiers of human tension, for that is where the Spirit of Jesus Christ is at work.

Take a look at this new land.

A recent survey by the Pew Forum on ‘Religion and Public Life,’ gives these insights:

28% of adults said they had left the faith in which they were raised. If changes amongst brands of Protestantism are included, 44% have switched affiliation or left.

A frequent comment : “We have no problem with religion; it’s just not a part of our lives.”

And a study by the fundamentalist Barna Group shares these results: 40% of Americans aged 16-29 are outside Christianity and have an overwhelmingly negative perception of it.

87% find it judgmental;
85% hypocritical;
78% old fashioned;
70% insensitive to others.

Only 30% consider it relevant to one’s life.

And these responses do not reflect ignorance or lack of information. The great majority have been to church, often for months or even years and found it wanting.

These voices and others mean you cannot do business as usual. Not many people look to the church to say the things that need to be said in the front of the life in our time No one outside really expects the modern church to have anything worth hearing, and the moment your

children feel that nothing adventurous or daring or new or relevant will happen in this place...they go looking for the places where such things can be expected. There must be a rethinking of what it means to be a Christian in this new cultural context, in this 'new land.'

Let's look at some marks of this new land: (A few which I noted to my Centennial classmates a couple of years back.)

One field to be cleared and plowed is the faith's relationship to the world of science, underscored by Dr. Philip Hefner's work and the Center for Religion and Science at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

As we face questions of creation, evolution, medical ethics, genetics, astronomy, and quantum physics we need the humility of the Templeton Foundation which reminds us that our concepts of God, the universe, and ourselves may be far too limited. It means to admit that because of the infinity of the universe and the boundless possibilities within it, God may majestically exceed anything that anyone has ever thought or written!

"I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense and reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use," wrote Galileo.

The late Arthur Peacocke, pioneer and leader in the religion and science dialogue, wrote just before his death in a volume published by Fortress Press:

Too often those attempting to develop a Christian theology that takes account of the worldview engendered by science have been content to leave intact traditional formulations of the Christian faith...They have often been concerned to defend and entrench these formulations while not recognizing at any deep level the need for the radical decisions that are necessary.

Richard Niebuhr observed that "any failure of Christians to develop a scientific knowledge of the world is not an indication of their loyalty to the revealed God, but of their unbelief."

Our own Bishop Mark Hanson in concert, noted recently

"What a marvelous opportunity we now have as a church body to engage wide ranging and complex questions that generations before us could never have contemplated."

Another challenge : Sexuality.

Last fall in an open letter to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, the first Bishop of the ELCA, Dr. Herbert Chilstrom, responded to a pastor's daughter who had written of the difficulty of coming to terms with her sexual orientation amid the religious culture that surrounded her. Chilstrom noted his early years when neither family nor church dealt with sex education. It was the same in college and seminary—nothing on the subject. (I suppose that maybe the required visit with Dr. Karl Mattson to obtain permission to marry, may have qualified as sex education.)

After years of discouraging results as the issue was raised, at times he noted “the volatility in the room was so intense that my wife feared for my safety!” Now we are involved in another study, but study is one thing, change is another.

“The good news for you,” he wrote, “is that change is happening...much too slowly, to be sure, but it is happening.”

And recalling the words of another Minnesota theologian, Garrison Keeler described the Lutheran approach to the question of homosexuality in the newspaper:

In 1996, the Church had said: ‘Marriage is a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and a woman.’ It was willing to ordain gay people who were in a chaste, or unconsummated relationship, a USSR, but not in a sexy one.

After due study, the ELCA Task Force acknowledged the deep divisions over the whole SSR question, reaffirmed the 1996 position while accepting that people in good conscience might choose to challenge it and asking them to be careful if they do, and not make a big show of it, but saying that if they do do what they will, probably nobody would give them a hard time about it. In other words: Nothing has changed, as if to say: “Essentially, we don’t approve, though in a sense we do, but probably not, but if you go ahead and do it, don’t feel bad about it, we understand....We will get along somehow as best we can.... This is the LUTHERAN WAY.”

Another challenge before us today in explosive colors is our understanding of other religions, pluralism.

For those who labored in other lands and cultures it has been a daily reality. As a young man I knew two kinds of people: we Lutherans and those who ought to be! But things have changed on this score.

There are now more Muslims in the U.S. than Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Jews. Buddhism is fast becoming an American religion; Hindu temples are found in most major cities. When we look at the planet, we see India and China today with two billion 500 million people and only a tiny Christian constituency among them.

Krister Stendahl once expressed this tension in the form of a question: “How can I sing my song of praise of Jesus without offending the other?” And he added: “Praise of Jesus should not be understood to exclude the experiences of others.”

“We have no theological right,” wrote Karl Barth, “to set any sort of limits to the loving kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ.”

We see the plurality of religious traditions as both the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of humankind. We affirm that God has been with them in

their seeking and finding, that where there is truth and wisdom in their teachings, love and holiness in their living,...this like any wisdom, insight, knowledge, love and holiness that is found among us...is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

A statement from the World Council of Churches (1990): “We believe in the salvation of the world, not the salvation of the Church,...and to this end the Church is a tool....but not the receptacle.”

And I leave this challenge with words of one of the true saints of Augustana, Dr. Eric H. Wahlstrom, penned 46 years ago:

Only a small segment of people is involved in the Judeo-Christian tradition, indeed, but we are to understand this tradition as the revelation of God’s universal and constant concern. God is actively engaged in the restoration of His whole creation, and we need not assume that his redemptive activity is limited to what has been revealed to us in the Biblical tradition. The Bible itself suggests that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” [Acts 10:34-5].

His infinite love has ways of manifesting itself...even to those outside of the Biblical tradition. Wherever people lift their hearts and hands in supplication to a power above on whom they depend...we have a right to believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...the God of all grace has called them also and has and has received them into his fellowship. The Biblical record and the events are universal in the sense that the gracious, redemptive activity of God revealed here, embraces all his creatures in the vast expanse of his mercy and grace.

What a great experience to be a part of seminary and church life today, when these matters can be studied and shared. And then also to be a part of the enlivened search for the very *Heart of Christianity* as Marcus Borg calls it or the *Soul of Christianity* explored by Huston Smith.

The intense interest in our understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures, the person and nature of Jesus, and the growth and development of the Church have created a new excitement for Christians today.

Facing the myriad attacks like Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, Harris’ *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Hutchin’s *God is not Great* (which are valuable because they name and decry some terrible excuses in the name of the faith), we are forced to look again at that which we call Christianity. Yet they also become a parody because they generalize about all religious people.

Religion will never regain its old power, the old thrill, its former place in society until it can face change in the same spirit that science faces change.

The principles of faith are eternal, but the expression of those principles—the container or vehicle for the experience of faith and the action which proceeds from faith—must change,

evolve, and seek new forms. Without this willingness to remodel the chassis, without the Protestant principle of critical evaluation of our own institutions, religion dies.

The long history of religion is filled with the failures of hundreds of religions, perhaps partly because their conceptions of God were too small or their practitioners too inflexible to receive a new revelation!

The big task is to live as competent interpreters in our world to redeem it. Our calling is to become Christ's people in this time and place for the sake of those in their place. That is the true church.

It is certain that change is on the way (a Luther, Calvin change). The religious venture in its present form cannot make it. The building materials of a new faith are all around us. We are discovering the truth that what God will do, God does in the world, not only in the church. We can set no theological limits to the love and activity of the Almighty which we have experienced in Christ.

We have to learn that faith is not won by clinging to thought patterns of the past, but by seeking their deeper meaning. Our task is growth, and no growth can take place where everything is certain, static, and seemingly secure. We have to take by leaving, to hold by letting go.

In spite of the fact that the church at its best is neither literalist, bigoted, or intolerant, it must be admitted that as a whole it doesn't show enough interest in the one thing needful...the development and transforming of the human mind...that it stresses the importance of doctrinal assent more than increase in wisdom and understanding.

We need to applaud LSTC for its initiatives in Science and religion and Luther Seminary and others in their dialogue with Islam, as we must be willing to move across new frontiers of mind and spirit.

What we need for discovering new pathways of salvation in our time is not retrenchment into the past to avoid the great changes washing over our culture, but the courage to go forward into an often murky unknown.....trusting that the God who has shown himself to our forebears in ways they could understand, will now reveal himself to us who possess new tools and methods by which we think and feel.

I can do no finer now,..... using other's words to better express myself,..... than share from two of my classmates:

First, from Giff (Dr. Herb Gifford): "From its earliest days, Augustana was future oriented and ecumenically minded."

And from Dr. Lyman Lundeen:

Augustana is more than a mere memory, but a set of qualities to help us find our bearings as we face the future. These characteristics will lead us well beyond our Swedish and Lutheran roots toward a vision that encompasses the whole of God's

world. At the heart of Augustana was God's own 'love that will not let us go,' but which also embraces 'all the children of the world.'

To choose what is difficult, as if it were easy, that is faith.