

Heirs of Augustana: Augustana's Influence on a Contemporary Pastor

By: Daniel A. Witkowski

One day, I was in Old Main at Augustana College with a little time on my hands. I decided to use my time for a period of reminiscence, a journey of reflection using as the content my experiences as a student there. I knew exactly how I wanted to do it.

I walked up the same speckly steps, hoisting myself up with the same thick wooden railing to the second floor. Straight ahead of me were the wooden double doors that half my life ago opened the way to my educational paradise....Dr. Dorothy Parkander's classes in Cable Hall.

When I opened the big door, I was horrified. The classroom paradise was rearranged exactly reverse of what it has been for years. My mind immediately resisted this innovation and quickly reoriented the room to the way it was, exactly the opposite. My eye surveyed where the second row of chairs used to be, in which I would sit on the edge of my seat while the greatest teacher of my life taught me how to think and imagine and live.

I gasped. During that beautiful education that prepared me for extraordinary life and ministry half my life ago, I had no idea that I was sitting right under the portrait of Lars Paul Esbjorn who was born nearly 200 years before. And I certainly didn't imagine then that I would follow him as pastor of First Lutheran Church, Moline exactly 150 years after he finished his ministry there.

Sentimentality might imagine that Esbjorn was looking over me, blessing me as a babe in Dr. Parkander's arms as I was being educated to ultimately follow into the destiny that he created.

Not so.

Instead, the forehead on that portrait wrinkles, the eyes squint, the nose scrunches up, and he says, “Oh, it’s you again.”

I imagined the same as I tromped around Sweden for the Church of Sweden’s 200th commemoration of Esbjorn’s birth. I followed in his footsteps, stood in his pulpits, met other pastors who were also his successors, and even towered over his grave. I kept thinking, “Wow, dude, you would not even like me. And I don’t think I would like you.” The other pastors shared the same impression of their relationship to the man. Steven Bahls, Augustana’s president, imagined the same if you would drop Esbjorn complete with black frock and round spectacles and bushy sideburns and strong piety and stubborn temperance onto the Augustana campus today. He would be both astounded and confounded by his legacy. Now, week-in and week-out, I occupy one of his pulpits (although he never physically occupied First Lutheran’s current pulpit). Here I stand with tremendous respect for his tradition as I’ve received it, for how it has provided for my deepest religious and intellectual experiences in this life, but with no desire whatsoever to emulate him or replicate his world views for life today.

Instead, I am a product of Augustana after 1935....Augustana as an intelligent *theological* movement. The Augustana I know is the Augustana of Dr. Conrad Bergendoff reading his daily devotions in Greek at age 102. It is Dr. Arnold Levin teaching how to dissect Paul and the Gospels in order to form intelligent conclusions about scripture. It is Dr. Gary Mann doing research about the possibility of a ‘God gene.’ It is Dr. Ann Boaden conjuring up vivid images for stories. It is Dr. Parkander and her emphasis on the classics. And it is even Dean Betsey Brodahl and her unrepentant pleasure principle. These people, their ways of being, and their disciplines incarnate what I think *Augustana* is. It is the college that bore the tradition to me.

This became incarnate to me during my installation as pastor of First Lutheran. My eyes witnessed a work of art that I shall never forget. Standing in the front row during the gospel procession, I turned toward the shining cross, the fiery torches, the big red book which bears the Word, and the living, white-robed people who carried these holy symbols. Exactly through those rich symbols, I had a perfect view of Dr. Parkander. There she was, beautiful, dignified, attentive...and she was, for me, one of the holy symbols. It was she who, in a literature class, a class about words, taught me the classic teaching of the theology of the Word but with exciting relevant nuances. The Word was not a musty, ancient, confined document written in that big book. She taught that the Word is this living, dynamic, creative thing that holds everything together, that is personified in Jesus the Christ, that draws us to high realities and into greater life. And God so bestowed on us the possibility that *our* words are capable of bearing it and creating good realities with words as our creator did and that is our call. It is this living Word which loves to create that I was being called to proclaim as a pastor.

She planted in me this divine articulation of possibility, creativity, dynamism, and engagement that God bestows on us as Lutheran Christian persons in the world. That I have translated into what it means to be *Augustana*. To be *Augustana* mandates a positive view of human potential, an infectious love of learning, a classic pursuit of the discipline, an expectation of excellence. It means cultivating a human heart that draws human beings into the beauty of the divine, doing human work that shows forth the divine, and gratefully and joyfully reverencing it all because it is of God, who really does love and bless! This, to me, is the living, breathing *Augustana*. And that is what *Augustana* is in our congregation.

The faith of my people who were formed by this *Augustana* is deep, strong, tenacious. They have a high view of the Church, a grand appreciation of the Gospel message, and a great love for God. Daily I see in my people strong devotion, quality

servanthood, quiet gift-giving, generous caretaking. They stake their lives on it as being the way of Christ and they see the institutional Church as the means by which Christ's work is done. You wouldn't believe how intensely important the holy stuff is to them.

So important is the Word, that one of our members, when she lay paralyzed from a broken neck and told that she would die, looked up at me with her beautiful brown eyes. Over the big neck brace she said, "My favorite Bible verse has always been, 'Be still and know that I am God.'" And she asked her son to constantly repeat it to her in her final hours until his voice was hoarse. He said it over and over and over like a centering prayer.

So important are the sacraments that another who had experimented with and loved many religions and ideologies, in her final moments called out to me, "Baptize!" I gently reminded, "You are baptized...it happened a long time ago." Then she said, "Lord's supper," and I recalled, "I gave you the Lord's supper two weeks ago when you could eat." And then I said, "I'll bless you with the ancient words of the benediction that have sent you out of church all these years and will send you out of this life." I took these hands and I placed them on her head and said, "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious unto you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace." And then she died. This is the way my people die... and the way they live. This intensity of faith is *Augustana*, still alive among the people of God in the Church. And I have to concede that this, too is part of Lars Paul Esbjorn's legacy.

I stood high on a scenic hill in Delsbo Sweden, looking at a big rock which marks where Esbjorn's house was when he was born. The house still exists somewhere down the road, but it had fallen into disrepair, was dismantled, and the wood was used for the infrastructure of a modern, bigger, more solid house. When I asked if we could see it, a Swede standing by said, "We could, but

there is no point. It doesn't even look like Esbjorn's house anymore. Same wood, but that is all that is the same."

I thought that was quite a metaphor for where we are all now as inheritors of the American Augustana tradition. What happened to Esbjorn's house is what happened to us. That house doesn't stand in the same place as it did in 1808, nor does it look the same. In fact, only part of it is the same, small, barely recognizable parts. I dare say, what it means to be *Augustana* is not the same, either. We've been enlarged and so has his tradition. The synod is morphed into the ELCA. The seminary moved. Pastors aren't the same. The College is not a Lutheran piety capitol. Congregations have tried new things. People have found new expressions of faith using the same old Gospel.

The new, bigger house we inhabit is built with some of the same materials but with modern innovations. Some things have been thrown away, some recycled, and others acquired. We inhabit some of the same spaces as he did, but we don't really stand in the same place he did any more.

All that's left of that house where it was is a rock.

Jesus told a story about a wise man who built his house on a rock. He told it at the end of his inaugural sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, after a long string of teachings like "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and "Do not judge lest you be judged," and "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Of that house built by wisdom, he said the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock. He said that everyone who hears his teachings in that sermon and acts on them will be like that. A house built on a rock.

And he told that everyone who hears his sermon but does not act is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. If they would treat

others as they would not want to be treated, if they would judge too much or too harshly, if they would hate rather than love, the rain would come and the floods would rise and the winds would blow and that house would fall down and great would be its fall.

All that's left is a rock.

Our rock is not Lars Paul Esbjorn, or Jenny Lind Chapel, or First Lutheran Church, or Augustana College, or the Augustana Synod and it never was. Our rock is our Lord Jesus and his actions and his teachings who and which all those institutions were created to adore, emulate, follow, and serve in courage and freedom. Built on that rock, our Lord Jesus, the Church does stand.

After you read that rock at Esbjorn's birthplace, you can turn around and what you see is the expansive view over the landscape of hills and valleys that were Esbjorn's first experiences of the world. You can see how this expansive landscape inspired him to go forth from that place into the wild world, over all the hills and through all the valleys, following the course of an adventurous Christian ministry that would be as expansive over the next 150 years.

That is *Augustana*.

That is where we stand today.

That is what it means to me to be an heir of *Augustana*, a pastor of the Church, and a Lutheran Christian person.