

Sermon at the Opening Service
Augustana Heritage Association Gathering
Friday, June 25, 2004

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Minneapolis Area Synod, ELCA
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John 1:1-20

About a decade of Christmas' ago, I went to an elderly Swedish American man's home for the purpose of doing a little research on a Christmas sermon. He had grown up in deep poverty on the Iron Range in Minnesota near Hibbing. So I sat down with him and asked him "What were Christmas' like for you back at the turn of the century?" He said "We would all get in a sleigh on Christmas day, go to the early Jullotta service, come home and later that morning we would exchange gifts." "And what kind of gifts did you receive?"

"Every year my sister and I got a brand new pair of mittens." "Anything else?" "No – just the mittens." "And how did you feel about that?" "We were thrilled with the gift and showed them off at school." "What else did you do?" "Later on we went out to the cows and for Christmas day gave them an extra helping of feed."

Now I may not be the brightest bulb in the room, but I am certain that those cows did not quite put it together that this was December 25th, the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, and that extra helping of food that just given. So the recipient did not even grasp the gift and yet it was still given. I think that was an act of gracefulness. A gift given that was totally centered in the faith of the giver without any idea that anything would ever be given back. And to remember the least of these on the birth of Jesus. A faithful grace filled gift.

I think it is important on days when we gather together, as an ethnic community, to remember where we came from. That we were strangers in a strange land and we knew poverty. It was a close companion. If I were to celebrate Christmas with my kids these days and if the gift they receive on Christmas was one pair of mittens, friends – they would be so bewildered that they couldn't even grasp the message I was trying to give them.

Our heritage has known poverty and being alone and far from home. In the Minneapolis area these days we have new immigrants that are among us. We need to remember that we were there once too and we need to care for fellow strangers in a strange land. People who now are a close companion of poverty. This was us one hundred years ago.

In preparation for this sermon I was thinking that to uplift heritage, to celebrate heritage, that is not connected to mission or look toward a legacy, can be a restrictive legalistic putsy activity. A white sepulture if you will – dead with no life. But a heritage that is connected to mission and that has vision towards a legacy becomes living and exciting. The heritage that undergirds mission and pushes toward legacy.

Last Saturday something very important happened in the Minneapolis Area Synod. I think I can safely say that finally we have a real Swede on the clergy roster of pastors in the Minneapolis Area Synod. I ordained Alem Hagos who came here from Sweden just a couple years ago. Before that, he lived in Sweden since he was a little boy, attended seminary in the Church of Sweden, continued his doctorate at Luther Seminary. Alem happens to be an Ethiopian Swede – and very proud of it. His family speaks Swedish in their home whenever they are together. To keep that part of their heritage together.

The Church of Sweden, as many of you know, were instrumental in the work of the Mekane Jesu Church in Ethiopia and Oromia. They did outstanding mission there. What Alem's ordination meant is that Swedish heritage and its mission, and now its legacy, all came together in Minneapolis last Saturday. Alem will be continuing in mission to African immigrants on the west bank of the Mississippi for years to come. He will be successful. He is incredibly persistent.

And what is our mission? It is threefold. It has nothing to do with putting on quaint potlucks and ethnic festivals. Our mission was given to us by Jesus himself to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them. And then the apostle Paul was arguing with the Jerusalem Christians about what the gentiles needed to do to become Christians – following the law of circumcision or not. Great disagreement ensued that went on and on. Finally at the end it was decided that Paul would be the apostle to the gentiles and Jerusalem church would go its way.

Just as Paul was leaving the meeting, one of the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem said to him “ But remember the poor.” As you go into the great affluence of the empire, remember your roots and remember who Jesus was so concerned about the poor. Isn't that an amazing last word that these two churches would say to each other? It must have been enormously important to the early disciples of Jesus.

Our mission – go and make disciples. And – remember the poor. And the third, which has been my privilege as a pastor in this church for the last 30 years Sunday after Sunday – to declare that the word has become flesh. And within that infleshment God has reconciled himself to us while we were still enemies God came to us and declared us righteous for Jesus sake. The cross drew us in and ignited our faith – we are a people forgiven and that is a privilege for us to proclaim the mission, go and baptize. The mission – remember the poor. The mission – declare the faithful righteous. Saved for Jesus sake.

When a heritage and mission and legacy come together, God must indeed smile for the risen Christ, the Christ Child, has been served and we are indeed then being disciples. Amen