

SERMON
Augustana Heritage Association
Festival Worship Service – June 27, 2004
Harold C. Skillrud
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4th Sunday after Pentecost (3rd Sunday after Trinity) Appointed Readings:
I Kings 19:15-16, 19-21
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62

As you heard the Lessons read this morning, you noted, as I did when I first received this assignment, that a common thread unites them: It's a warning not to be overly preoccupied with the past.

In the Old Testament Lesson Elisha is admonished to leave his home and occupation in order to become Elijah's successor. He not only burns his bridges behind him, but he actually burns his 12 yoke of oxen to prove his readiness.

In Galatians Paul reminds the young Christians to abandon their former ways, their attachment to the sins of the flesh, in order to live into the freedom of the Gospel.

And in today's Gospel Jesus reminds us, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

All are appropriate reminders to us this weekend that a blind preoccupation with the past can actually hinder rather than advance the kingdom. Most of us here today are in our 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, and nostalgia reigns supreme among us. Our minds are sharpest when we reflect on events of the distant past, rather than on the happenings of yesterday. And, of course, there are memories that are appropriate, not least when we reflect on the 102-year history of our Augustana Lutheran Church. In fact I would argue that the last decade of Augustana's life was its finest. In that period from 1953 to 1962:

Membership in congregations reached its height. The post World War II boon in spirituality led to the development of new missions at home and abroad. Together with the other Lutheran bodies that now make up the ELCA we numbered 6,000,000 members at that time, compared with 5,000,000 today. When compared to the American population as a whole, we were 50% larger then.

Our Church Colleges were strong in enrollment and support. Funding from the Church and Conferences was considerably higher than it is today. Evidence of this is the beautiful Chapel in which we are gathered, gift of Minnesota Conference congregations just prior to the ELCA merger.

Our willingness to be open to changes in liturgical style, in order make a united Lutheran advance in evangelism and new mission development, led us to surrender the beautiful Augustana liturgy we enjoyed today, in favor of the Common Service in the new SERVICE BOOK AND HYMNAL of 1958.

It was the decade when we joined forces with the United Lutheran Church in America to invite all Lutherans to form one Lutheran Church in America. We succeeded in bringing four groups together, and our Augustana ecclesiology made a permanent impact on the new Lutheran Church in America.

A steady supply of candidates for ordained ministry found their way to Augustana Seminary – an average of 52 incoming Junior students during the 1953-63 decade. In fact, my class, ordained in 1954 in Los Angeles, was the largest ever with 80 men being ordained.

Rounding out that last decade was the decision to merge Augustana Seminary with four other seminaries to form the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. For the sake of the larger good, we surrendered our beloved school and campus.

It was indeed a Golden Decade.

Fortunately, we did not stop our forward movement in order to savor our delicious past. We “put our hand to the plow” in order to turn new soil and thus extend the kingdom:

We Expanded Our Ordained Ministry to Include Women.

Prior to this time each class of ordinands was exclusively male. The collection by Dr. Conrad Bergendoff, THE AUGUSTANA MINISTERIUM 1850-1962, contained 2,504 names – from Lars Esbjörn to Gerald Youngquist, whose class was ordained 42 years ago this very day – all men.

In 1963 I was a LCA delegate to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Helsinki, Finland. In one of my small discussion groups was a woman from Schleswig-Holstein in northern Germany, who identified herself as Pastor Grosch. She was a formidable looking woman, actually looked like Martin Luther. There was no doubt she was certain of her credentials. I had met my first woman Lutheran Pastor. I was impressed. Returning to the United States, I learned that our Church was undertaking a study of women’s ordination. By 1970, convinced that there was no Scriptural prohibition, the LCA began ordaining women.

Last week, while on a Board of Pensions assignment at the University of Delaware, I happened upon Pastor Beth Platz, the first woman ordained into the Lutheran Church in North America. We chatted about the differences women in ordained ministry have brought – the positive contribution of woman pastors, the fact that our seminaries now

number up to 50% women. The Church has been blessed. By looking forward, we have put a restrictive tradition behind us, for the sake of the advancement of the kingdom.

We Expanded Our Outreach to Include Ethnic Minorities

There were few ethnic minorities in the Augustana Ministerium. I remember listening to Pastor Jesse Routte when he spoke at First Lutheran Church in Rock Island in 1951. He spoke of graduating from Augustana Seminary some years earlier, but the church fathers had no place for him to serve in the Augustana Lutheran Church at that time, so he was transferred to the United Lutheran Church in America who found a place for him in New York. Similarly, there were few ethnic minorities among the laity in our congregations. My first congregation was typical. I came to St. John's Lutheran Church in Bloomington, Illinois, following my ordination in 1954. The congregation had been organized in 1872 by Augustana's President at that time, Pastor T. N. Hasselquist. Eighty-two years later it still consisted primarily of members of Swedish descent. As the grandson of Norwegian immigrants, I helped integrate the congregation. Though there were a number of bona fide ethnic minorities in this community of two universities and the headquarters of the world's largest auto insurer, few found their way to St. John's.

In 1979 I was called to the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Atlanta, GA. There in the South, which for many years had resisted any form of integration, I was shocked to see an African American family worshipping at Redeemer. Having learned that Dr. and Mrs. Alonzo Crim and son, Tim, were members of Redeemer, that he was the Superintendent of Schools in Atlanta, that he held honorary degrees from several ivy league universities, I made it a point to have a luncheon appointment with him. I said to him, "Dr. Crim, we are delighted to have you and your family at Redeemer, but I am puzzled that one of the large and prestigious Black congregations such as Ebenezer Baptist or Big Bethel, did not recruit you. How did this happen?" "That's simple," he replied with a smile. "I have always been a Lutheran. Tell me, have you ever heard of Pastor Philip Johnson. I replied that I had, and that I knew he had served as Pastor of Salem Lutheran Church in Chicago, a well-known Augustana Church, which at one time had been served by Dr. Conrad Bergendoff. "Well, then," he continued, "you know that the neighborhood around Salem went through a racial transition. While most white congregations fled to the western suburbs, Pastor Johnson insisted that Salem would remain and continue to minister to the community. My Mother was so impressed," he added, "that she sent me there to Sunday School, and I have been a Lutheran ever since." That was just the beginning of progress in this area for Redeemer and many other congregations.

Yes, we have made some headway. We are far from the heady goal we set in 1987, that the ELCA would have 10% membership of persons of color or whose primary language was other than English, but we have made great strides. Witness the front cover of the current edition of the LSTC EPISTLE – it features a photograph of our successor seminary's first African American Lutheran Professor, the beloved Dr. Albert "Pete"

Pero, now retiring after a long and meaningful teaching ministry. Read in that same issue an article about the diverse student body at LSTC, and the “President’s Message,” by the school’s first African American President, Dr. James Kenneth Echols, who states, “Our unity in Christ frees us to express and rejoice in our cultural diversity.”

We are not yet where we want to be, but we are light years from where we once were, because “we have put our hand to the plow,” and removed a mighty obstacle to the kingdom’s advance.

We Expanded Our Concern For the Marginalized and Disenfranchised Persons of Different Sexual Orientation

I mentioned earlier the congregation I first served in Central Illinois. Over the 25 years of my ministry there, with growth in the congregation and a high mobility rate in the community, over 5,000 persons passed through our doors at St. John’s. Yet, in all those years, I came to know only five persons of a sexual orientation different from my own. Why? Because that’s all there were? You know better than that. It was a time in society and church when one dared not to reveal a different orientation for fear of alienation, persecution, job loss, and discrimination.

When I moved to Atlanta in 1979 I was confronted by several members who sought out their new Pastor to share their vision for the congregation, to inquire about my style of ministry, to see where I stood on certain issues, especially the controversial ones. Several of those who came were gay. They said to me that they had found a home at Redeemer, that they were accepted in the congregation, that they felt comfortable there, and wondered what my attitude would be. I had to be honest and say, “Frankly, I am rather naïve in this area. I know little beyond what I have read. Tell me about yourself.” One by one they shared their life stories. There was a common thread. None had chosen this orientation. They gradually realized as they matured that they were different in terms of sexual attraction. One acknowledged how his parents had spent thousands of dollars, to the point of almost losing their home, in order to get him “re-programmed.” But it didn’t work. He was the same individual who later moved into a small, neighboring town in Central Illinois, rose to positions of leadership within his congregation, until word got out that he was gay. Then, at a formal congregational meeting, involving even the President of that Lutheran Church body, he was excommunicated. I heard many such stories of pain. I assured those who came that they would still feel comfortable at Redeemer so long as I was Pastor. As an expression of support, on several occasions, I conducted house blessings where gay couples had purchased a home together.

One day I was accosted by a member of the congregation who felt my stance was inappropriate. My response was that if every member of Redeemer was as dedicated as its gay members, contributed of their time and money as generously, were as loving and compassionate toward others as our gay members, we would turn Atlanta upside down. I never heard from him again.

Today, we are facing some serious issues in this area in the ELCA. It is one thing to make persons with a different sexual orientation welcome in our congregation. It's quite another to deal with the Blessing of same sex couples or the Ordination of persons in a same sex relationship. I do not know in what form resolutions will come before our ELCA in 2005. I only hope that the openness we have shown in the past to a healthy consideration of controversial issues will prevail, and that the ELCA will not implode over these matters. I hope that the unity we have in Jesus Christ will be sufficient to enable all of us to live together in this one Church, despite differences in this area. When I read in the Book of Acts how Paul and Peter and the early church engaged in heated debate over the question of how much of Jewish tradition the Gentiles were expected to embrace in becoming Christian, I am convinced that there were those who were not pleased with the final resolution. They probably went to their graves feeling that Paul and his associates were wrong. But, they did not leave the Church, nor did they form a competing sect, but they remained a part of the Body of Christ in which they had been baptized. I pray the same for us.

Why the Gains?

Ours is a very different Church in 2004 compared with the Augustana Lutheran Church in its last year of 1962. Grateful for the last Golden Decade, which ended with the formation of the LCA, we "put our hand to the plow." We looked forward. We sought the guidance of the Spirit as we faced continual change. We ordained women and cherished their gifts. We welcomed ethnic minorities as members and clergy. We accepted persons of a different sexual orientation into our congregations and made them feel welcome.

How were we able to make these changes, both in the days of Augustana, and in the years since? How could we be convinced that the Church would not self-destruct in the light of monumental changes? There were two reasons::

First and foremost, we believed the promise that Jesus spoke to Peter, when proclaiming that He would found the Church on this rock. He promised that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This is Christ's Church! It is not our Church. He has promised to watch over and preserve it. The Church will survive because this is Christ's promise. This gives us confidence as we face a future that will inevitably bring more change.

Secondly, in plowing the furrow, we have kept our eyes focused on the hallmark of our faith, "we are saved by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." We have kept before us the meaning of Martin Luther's seal: the black cross that depicts our sin, the red heart which symbolizes the blood of Christ shed for our sins, the white shield that speaks of our hope, the blue sky which depicts heaven, and the gold rim which tells us that our life in Christ is eternal. Justified by faith in Christ Jesus, we see no need to try to

justify ourselves before God or anyone else. This gives us the freedom to be open, to listen to the voice of God, to change in ways that conform to God's will.

Grateful for our past, but not overly preoccupied with it, "we put our hand to the plough," removing any impediment to the advancement of the kingdom, as we seek to be faithful as His Church today!

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