

A PASTORAL REFLECTION

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Ezekiel Lutheran Church, River Falls, WI

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Brothers and Sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As your pastor here at Ezekiel, I speak to you out of the shepherding role to which I am called in the name of Jesus Christ. And, I speak to you within the shepherding role to which we are all called in the name of Jesus Christ. As Jesus called the disciples following the resurrection, so he calls us too: "Tend my sheep." (John 21)

This is a holy and awesome call because the flock we are called to tend belongs to Jesus. So, all the shepherding we do here at Ezekiel is centered in Jesus Christ.

Earlier in John's gospel we hear the words of Jesus, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd... and I lay my life down for the sheep." (John 10:11,15)

The flock of the Good Shepherd is an amazingly diverse flock, made up of different Christian churches scattered across the globe. Even within our own Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) there is a great diversity of congregations and members. This diversity became apparent in the decisions made at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis at the end of August. The assembly was made up of a little over 1,000 voting members, coming from synods and congregations across the country, including 60% lay people and 40% pastors.

One of the resulting decisions of the assembly was that, whereas persons in committed same-gender relationships formerly were barred from serving on any official rosters of our church, a way has now been opened for them to serve in such ministries, if they are otherwise qualified and if a congregation chooses to call them.

This change in policies in the ELCA, adopted at the Churchwide Assembly, allows local congregations to choose leaders that will best serve in their own settings. It is important to clarify that no congregation will be forced to call or receive a person in a same-gender relationship as their pastor or rostered lay leader. In fact, our church body has recognized and provided a declaration whereby any congregation in the ELCA can choose not to accept this option. Our council has chosen to adopt this declaration as our congregational policy and it states that Ezekiel Lutheran Church will not call a pastor or lay rostered leader who is, or intends to be in, a same-gender relationship. The council has adopted this declaration after careful deliberation, and prayer, believing it will best serve our ministry setting here at Ezekiel. As pastor, I support this declaration and want you to know that I have communicated it to our Northwest Synod of Wisconsin and Bishop Duane Pederson.

Now the reality of diversity in the church is that some in our congregation may disagree with this declaration. It may be helpful for those who find themselves in this position to know that I am not insensitive to you, nor is the council. In fact, as soon as the council voted on this declaration they turned their attention immediately to the question: “Who is welcome here?”

This question, and the council conversation responding to it, reflected a sincere concern for the whole flock of the Good Shepherd. While the declaration statement is related specifically to the policies pertaining to the office of ministry, and public rites of that office, it is not meant to be an exclusionary statement about the shepherding ministry we all share here at Ezekiel.

When the council wrestled with the “Who is welcome here?” question, they reflected upon the nature of Jesus’ ministry on this earth. We must do the same. Was anyone excluded from Jesus’ outreach and care? When Jesus spoke of laying down his life for the sheep, who was he including? There are words of Jesus in John’s gospel indicating that Jesus continues to reach out beyond the confines of any humanly perceived or defined limits when he says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” (John 10:16)

And so, when the council adopted this declaration that you have before you today they immediately felt the weight of our holy calling to the shepherding task in Jesus’ name. The council is now at work on answering their own question: “Who is welcome here?” I hope we will all keep this question in our minds as we grapple with church policies.

Policies are necessary for the sake of order in this world but they have a way of drawing lines that segregate and separate people into positions over and against one another; a sign of our fallen human nature.

Even before the policy change at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly this summer people found themselves to be in very different places on same-gender relationship issues. After the vote in August, the differences showed in the reactions and feelings that ran from one end of the spectrum to the other. I want to acknowledge that these reactions are sincere and the feelings are real. They come out of a depth of conviction about issues that have been studied in scripture, prayed over, and pondered faithfully.

Thoughtful, prayerful, faithful Christian people have come to very different conclusions in their discernment of these issues. Such differences can bring about conflict in the Christian community. I am aware that Ezekiel has known the pain of disagreements, and also division, on a similar issue in recent history. Therefore, this is a vulnerable and sensitive time.

It is my desire as your called pastor to minister to the whole church. Those who agree and those who disagree. I do this in the name of Christ who, on the cross, opened his arms to all people.

While we want to deal honestly and openly with issues that confront the church, there is always a danger in over-focusing on any issue. Because doing so can polarize people into different positions and distract the congregation from the true focus of our life together: making known the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and tending his flock.

Life, and the abundant life, is not found in a position. Life, and the abundant life, is found in Jesus Christ. It is my commitment as your pastor to do everything I am able to do to keep the focus of our life together on Jesus Christ. Therefore, I want to encourage all of us at Ezekiel to pull together and to seek the unity we have as the body of Christ.

Unity in the church, therefore, is not based on everyone coming to the same conclusion on issues - issues that are not essential to our core belief that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This core belief is what we will continue to communicate in the worship and education programs of our church. This is true of our Sunday school and Wednesday school programs as well.

Our focus and curriculum have not changed and they will not change. Bible readings and lessons from The Small Catechism point to God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who continually calls us to live the abundant life as children of God. We live in that abundant life as we live in loving relationship with God and in loving relationship with our neighbors in this world. A mark of our human brokenness is that we fall short in our love for God and neighbor. But, Jesus never stops forgiving us and never stops calling us anew to this love.

As we read in 1st John, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” (3:16) The nature of the love of God manifest in Jesus is a sacrificial, suffering love. When Christian love is demonstrated in our lives we experience the same. I find the words of Thomas Merton helpful: “As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the resetting of a Body of broken bones.”

Our unity, and wholeness, in the diverse body of the ELCA is found in Christ; and living together in the suffering love of Christ. As an ELCA pastor, I have to say that I honestly struggle with this call to live out the suffering love of Christ. There is a part of me that wishes everything could be settled more comfortably. But, I do not believe the faithful path is a comfortable one. I am called to live and minister within a church body that has come to diverse conclusions on their discernment of difficult issues.

The question for us as a congregation is: how do we live with others who have come to a different discernment? I think the words of St. Paul in his writing to the Colossians can be helpful: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.” (Colossians 3:12-15)

Bearing means forbearing; bearing the burden of the other person, including the person with whom we disagree or the person who has gotten it wrong. These words give us a Christ-centered vision for how we can live with people who have given us good reason to register a valid complaint.

Martin Luther in commenting on another passage from Paul's letter, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2), writes, "We are all equal... Why then does one man puff himself up against another, and why do we not rather help one another? ...if there is anything in us, it is not our own, it is a gift of God ...it is entirely a debt one owes to love, that is, to the law of Christ. And if it is a debt one owes to love, then I must serve others with it and not myself."

Our Christian faith tradition teaches us that the wrong of another is not seen as a reason to separate but a reason to serve; to draw near and help my erring brother or sister. It is a burden to bear, with love, in the name of Christ.

Some of us may feel that the ELCA has erred in the decisions made in August. I have sensed this burden. And, what shall I conclude? Is this a time to separate, or, a time to draw near in suffering love? The conviction I have felt, and I believe it is of the Holy Spirit, is that this is a time to draw near to my brothers and sisters in the ELCA.

It is with what I perceive to be a sense of this spirit-led drawing near to our brothers and sisters, even when we are not of the same mind, that our council adopted a unanimous resolution at their October 12th meeting stating that we would not pursue a vote at Ezekiel to leave the ELCA.

Yes, the ELCA is flawed, like every human family on this earth. And, I don't understand or agree with everything "the family" does. But, like our human families, we are held together by our identity in the midst of differences. Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, has named us as his own and formed the flock; his body in this world. St. Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." (1 Corinthians 12:12)

Together with other congregations in the ELCA we do God's work; wonderful and vital work. We send missionaries in global mission who bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ – 260 missionaries in 50 countries. We respond to hunger with food and provide relief to those stricken by natural disasters both locally and internationally. And, our mission reaches out in Christ's name in countless other ways.

I understand there are those who are honestly struggling with the recent ELCA decisions and wondering if they can continue to financially support the benevolence ministry of the ELCA. While I appreciate the sincerity of the struggle, we must stop and consider what happens when we withdraw our gifts from the ELCA. We cannot withdraw our benevolence without hurting the people we are seeking to reach out to and help in Jesus' name.

And so, I believe this is a time to draw near to our brothers and sisters in the ELCA, and to draw near to one another. Our unity is shaped by a common mission, centered in Christ, and in our commitment to living out our faith in witness and service for the sake of the world.

At Ezekiel, we are followers of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. Jesus said, “I lay my life down for the sheep.” Let us follow Jesus and set those around us a faithful example. Let us model our lives on this shepherding self-giving love of Christ, and build up the body of our congregation, even when that is not the easy way. Let us show the community around us that division and separation can be overcome by those who gather in the flock of the Good Shepherd, where unity and love prevail. Let us demonstrate that our mission in Christ is greater than any of our differences.

As we gather in the sanctuary, with the baptismal font in the center – and as I conclude we will be preparing for two baptisms today at our second service – we are reminded of our identity and calling: We come to the waters of the font; we are washed by the water and word; anointed by the Spirit; we are named God’s beloved children. With Christ we are chosen to proclaim God’s mercy in a suffering world. With Christ we are called to witness to God’s justice, do good, and relieve the suffering of the oppressed.

Let us be about this holy calling.

Please know, as always, if you have concerns or questions I welcome the opportunity to converse with you. Although we won’t have time for that today, please feel free to contact me and I will be happy to visit with you.

I would like to close with a reading from Philippians 2: “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Let us pray...

Amen.

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