

Sunday 21B 2009

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 23, 2009

Occasional

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Our denomination had a national convention this week. We call it a churchwide assembly. And at that churchwide assembly, our denomination, the ELCA, made it possible for a congregation that wants to call a gay pastor to be their pastor– and if they can find a qualified one– then that can happen.

This is a victory for some. And this is a great betrayal for others. I estimate that about 15% of you are rejoicing. And I estimate 15% of you are unhappy or angry. After praying about this all week, and starting to write two or three other sermons, I have come to believe that what you most need to hear from me this morning is some frank talk about what kind of a church we are. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

And to talk frankly with you, I'm going to have to set aside the humorous and heart-warming stories about Norwegian farmers who live in South Dakota. And I'm going to have to set aside a lot of the politically correct language that I customarily use because this sermon would be three hours long if I put in all the footnotes, and all of the qualifying clauses, and all of the approved vocabulary.

This week, there was a female pastor from the Pacific Northwest who spoke at the churchwide assembly. Wherever it is that she is a pastor, it is somehow a joint ministry of the ELCA and the Roman Catholic Church. Whatever it is that they do, these Lutherans and Roman Catholics are working together. And she said this week, at the churchwide assembly in Minneapolis, that the Roman Catholics are in awe. Because what they normally see in their church is a bunch of old white men– the bishops and cardinals– gathering together and deciding how things are going to be for the 67 million Roman Catholics in this country. And they watch us Lutherans, and they almost can't believe it. Because all of our important decisions in the ELCA are made by groups which are 2/3 laity, and 1/3 clergy. And which are 50% female, and 50% male, and which are 10% people of color, or people whose primary language is not English.

As a matter of Protestant principle we are structured in such a way that laity always are in the majority, and always have the final say on anything. Clergy like me are very influential. But the clergy do not control this church. The laity do. As a matter of Protestant principle.

So the ELCA is a form of democracy. But we are not like the hateful political campaigns that many Americans now believe are “democracy.” We have principles of consensus. And we have a moral duty to respect others. And when any people in this church start trying to use all of the divisive, hateful, win-lose tactics that the two American political parties try to use, we call them on it. We’re not the Democratic party, or the Republic party. We’re a church. We don’t fight ugly. And when our members start fighting ugly, and start acting like those political groups out there in our culture, we DO stop them. For all of our faults as a church, in the final analysis, the example of Jesus guides us. We are a sort of democracy. But we are not *that* democracy that you see on cable television.

So keeping all of that in mind, the decisions that were made this week came out of years of decisions, made by all of these complex, democratic, Christian bodies throughout the ELCA, on many levels. There is no “they” in the ELCA. We are not bossed around by bishops. In fact, our bishops formally and officially urged the ELCA to take a more cautious approach this year, and had the laity leaders listened to the bishops, some of the actions that were taken this week would not have been taken. But the laity-controlled church did not accept the bishop’s advice. But that’s Protestantism. That’s Lutheranism. The bishops cannot force something upon us that we do not want. The bishops cannot stop something that the people truly want.

Another fact about the ELCA is that the process for identifying a pastor is completely controlled by the local congregation. It was almost four years ago that you voted to call me to be your pastor. That took a 2/3 vote by all the lay people of this congregation. No bishop, no denominational committee, no body can ever force a congregation to accept a pastor that it does not want. *That is also* a key part of our Lutheran identity. For more than 30 years, we Lutherans in this country have had female pastors. But would Dove of Peace ever vote favorably to call a new female pastor? I hope so. But I don’t know. Nobody can make an ELCA congregation call a female pastor if that congregation is firmly convinced that a female pastor is not appropriate. And no one will every be able to make an ELCA congregation call a gay pastor unless that congregation is firmly convinced that a gay pastor is appropriate.

What the ELCA decided in Minneapolis this week is that some of us have a *bound conscience*. That means that some of us believe, on the basis of the Bible, and on the basis of church history, and on the basis of our consciences, that homosexual behavior is innately sinful and can never be condoned by the Christian Church. This is not homophobia. It is a deeply held conviction, by devoted followers of Christ, who have intensely struggled with this question.

Some of us believe, on the basis of the Bible, and on the basis of church history, and on the basis of our consciences, that for there to be true Christian justice, gay and lesbian people need to be fully welcomed into the Church, and they need the Church to give them the opportunity to live life sexually, and responsibly, and maturely within the Christian community. This is not gay activism. It is a deeply held conviction, by devoted followers of Christ, who have intensely struggled with this question.

Because Lutheranism was founded by a monk whose conscience was bound by his years of prayer, study, and reflection, the ELCA has decided that we, after years of considering this ought to live together and that those whose consciences are bound to one of these perspectives, or the other, are to be respected and honored by the rest of us. Is this the way that Republicans and Democrats do things? *No*. Is this win-lose? *No*. Is this easy? *No*. It is the way that we Lutherans do things. Because of our heritage. Because of our love for Christ, and our love for our neighbor.

Members of our congregation ask me what my own convictions are. That's not a hard question for me to answer. I believe that sexual relations are profound, and affect not only the two people who are involved. I believe that sexual relations belong in the context of love and commitment and respect. I believe that in our culture sex has become a commodity. I believe that men and women are turned into sex objects, and they are demeaned when that happens. I believe that casual sex— which is very common our culture— hurts our hearts and spirits. I wish that we could equip our young adults to resist casual sex.

I know that there are members of our congregation who are gay, who are living in a responsible, sexual, respectful, committed relationship. And I do support them, and to the best of my ability, I always will.

I know that there are members of our congregation who are married, who have reached an age, and a stage of their lives where sexual relations are almost non-existent. Their love is a marvel. Knowing them is one of the greatest inspirational gifts that I have ever received as a pastor. I support them, and to the best of my ability, I always will.

I know that there are members of our congregation who are living together, or cohabitating, because legal marriage will disrupt their health care arrangements, their finances, and the lives of their children and grandchildren. So they live together, married, as they say, in the eyes of God. Maybe not married in the eyes of the state of Arizona. I support them, and to the best of my ability, I always will.

There are people in our congregation who long for a partner. They have not found a partner. They have not found a committed, loving, Christian partner. Rather than compromise their integrity, they are living without affection, without sex. I support them, and to the best of my ability, I always will.

And there are those in our congregation who are sexually active, who have a fulfilling, happy, love life with the man or woman of their dreams. And every morning they grin at each other across the breakfast table. And every evening, together they fold back the bedspread and fluff the pillows, and blissfully, they fall asleep in the arms of their lover. [And I just hate them. *No*.] I support them, and to the best of my ability, I always will.

The key words for me are not “one man and one woman.” The key words for me are commitment, integrity, respect, love, and honor. In the Small Catechism, Luther wrote: *We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.*¹ Key words: pure, decent, word, deed, love, honor. And where one person’s conscience is prayerfully and respectfully convicted by scripture, we will honor that conviction, even if we do not agree. Where one congregation chooses to *not* consider a gay or lesbian pastor, we will honor that conviction, even if we do not agree. Where another congregation chooses *to* call a gay or lesbian pastor, we will honor that conviction, even if we do not agree.

The Holy Spirit seems to work with human consciences, human reason, scripture, and tradition. When all of these forces are profoundly at work, we Lutherans do not have a pope who can step in and give us a black-and-white answer. We are obligated to give the Spirit respect for its work, and to remain a part of the church into which the Spirit has gathered us. Amen.

1. Timothy Wengert translation, Augsburg-Fortress, 1996.