

James, Apostle

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 25, 2010

Occasional

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

Dear Friends:

I wanted to begin my sermon by calling these the “dog days of summer.” Then my dog gave me a look that said, “Hey, this weather isn’t my fault!” So let me begin by saying that in these CAT days of summer, I have begun the rollout of [our vision and plan for the future](#). Which is still being finalized in its details. But the core principles are done. And I’m speaking with you now about our core principles.

Today I am speaking with you about the ministry of the laity. And I want to tell you about an ongoing dialog that I’m having with a member of our congregation. It’s a dialog. It’s not a fight. Rotten vegetables have been thrown, but it’s not a fight. It’s a dialog. It’s our junior high confirmation teacher. I’m not going to use her real name, but for the purposes of this sermon, let’s just give her a fictional name... Bonnie Wagner.

Bonnie believes that confirmation should have some expectations. She believes that young people want to be taken seriously. She believes that they have gifts to share with the church, and that they ought to be encouraged to share their gifts, even if that means a little arm-twisting.

My career has taught me. Don’t have any expectations or requirements for confirmation. The kids rebel. The parents are going to make trouble. So I learned to skip it. I developed this attitude that if you can count to ten, then I’ll confirm you. And if you can’t count to ten, I’ll confirm you anyway. I used to ask myself why parents wanted their children to be confirmed, if confirmation ranked number 47 on their list of priorities. I learned to quit asking questions like that. But Bonnie Wagner– remember, that’s a fictional name that I just made up– Bonnie isn’t afraid to ask for more. And it works. It builds better relationships. It builds stronger disciples. And in the end, it’s actually more fun.

Ministry of the laity. In baptism, each of us is made a minister. I had been a minister for more than 32 years before I became a pastor. That’s what Jesus intended. He intended for all of us to be doing his work. There were no clergy when the Church got started. It had leaders, but it didn’t have pastors. We can actually date the books of the New Testament by their use of the word bishop. The early books of the New Testament don’t have clergy. And the later books do.

You can trace the marginalization of laity in church architecture. In the earliest churches, there was only one place where scriptures were read and where preaching took place. It was called an *ambo*, which means a raised place, a platform. Then, in church architecture, there came a separation of the pulpit from the lectern. It was a way of distinguishing two types of scripture, which evolved into

distinguishing two types of people: clergy and laity. Modern churches, over the last twenty-five years, have been returning to the original practice of having one ambo. Which means that when this sanctuary was built in 1967, it was 20 years ahead of its time; or alternately, 1900 years late.

The significance of the ambo is that the Word is proclaimed by both clergy and laity. In our churches, the two principal actions are the Word and the Sacraments. Where is God? The Lutheran answer is that God is in the Word and the Sacraments. And laity participate in both the proclamation of the Word, and the distribution and application of the Sacraments.

True story. In Louisiana, we had a joint worship service of Episcopalians and Lutherans. And the planners of that worship service were Lutherans. And at that worship service— as in worship services I have seen in this synod— all of the people who were giving communion were clergy. Some were Lutheran, some were Episcopalian, but all were pastors and priests. And there was a firestorm of criticism from the Episcopalians after that service. Because the Lutheran planners had failed to include any lay people in the leadership of the Eucharist. And the Episcopalians were right! They were more Lutheran than the Lutherans, praise God. Somebody has to be a Lutheran, even if it's an Episcopalian.

As I said, I have attended synod worship services where lay people were excluded from the liturgy. But that's going to change now that our bishop has put Eric Holtan in charge of synod assembly worship services. We expect great things, Eric. And if you disappoint us, we are going to quit singing all of those hard songs that you make us sing. Eric is like Bonnie Wagner— I remind you again, that is a fictitious name— Bonnie expects more from people so that they can be more and do more and know that they matter and that their contribution to our community life matters. Eric is like Bonnie in that way. Bonnie is just prettier, and she's from the south, and in the south, ladies always get their way. Eric is a Norwegian bachelor farmer, and fate has decreed that their lives will always be a struggle.

This is an aspect of our Lutheran identity. The priesthood of all believers. You have a pastor, here, but not a priest. Because all of us are priests. The word priest means that you are a go-between between humans and God. You bring God to people, and you bring people to God. That's what a priest does. We're all priests. It's embedded in the architecture of this building. From the fact that we have one *ambo*, to the fact that the cinder blocks of this church are porous, and therefore they breathe and they perspire, and they are therefore living stones. And this church is built of living stones, and that means you. And you don't face the pulpit, or the stage, or the television monitors. You face each other. You are priests, Luther said. You are little Christs, Luther said. Little Christs!

Business cards for laity members are introduced at this point

These statements that I've been sharing with you tell some of the story of Dove of Peace. They don't tell it all. They are selected statements to reach selected members of the public. Particularly, people who have doubts about the Church.

Men and women, you *must* understand me when I tell you that the reputation of Christianity is in the dog house. Thirty years of Christians bossing others around, trying to control congress and the judiciary. Thirty years of self-righteous television preachers who denounce others and then get caught in a hotel room with someone who isn't their wife. And may not even be a female. And may not even be an adult. Cover ups in some institutions. Thirty years of hypocrisy, judgment, and lust for power and money have wrecked the reputation of the Christian churches in America and in many other places.

And Dove of Peace is suffering. It isn't fair. Do you remember how, in second grade, your teacher would punish everyone for something that only one or two people did? I wasn't the one who went on TV and said that America deserved to be attacked on 9-11 because America isn't Christian enough. I wasn't the nut who said that. But I suffer. My ministry suffers. More importantly, the name of Christ is tarnished.

But. Friends. Hear me now. We are doing something about it. The good news of Jesus Christ does not belong to those pitiable and wicked Christians who have set Christianity back at least a century or more. We are doing something about it. I will be da**ed if I am going to sit by and let the voices of bigotry, hatred, and hypocrisy take Jesus away from those who need him most. Yes, I nearly said "damn." Here's the bishop's phone number: 602-957-3223. You can disagree with my choice of words. But can you really disagree with what I am telling you? We must sharpen our message, here, because if we do not, then many of God's children are only going to hear about a Jesus that covers up child abuse, steals money from the elderly, blames America for 9-11, and builds expensive buildings. That's not the Jesus I know! That's not the Jesus you know.

And we are taking action. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Amen.