

Proper 15A - August 14, 2011

Tomorrow our ELCA will meet for the week long church wide assembly in Orlando, Florida. This is the national assembly that takes place every two years. I've never been to one of those assemblies but a friend went as a delegate several years ago and returned home rather excited and inspired by his experience. He said he went to the Assembly with what he considered to be a rather solid understanding of what the church is all about but came back with an even more expansive sense of the church. The church was greater and larger than he ever imagined. By that, he was not talking about numbers. He was reflecting on his surprise by how diverse, multi-layered, and how colorful and utterly fascinating the church is in all of its manifestations. He worshiped with an amazing array of folks and met people doing ministry in all kinds of amazing ways. That's what happens when we get beyond the confines of what we know and what we are comfortable with and what we are used to. We discover that, yes, life is larger than we imagine and even the church is bigger than we ordinarily imagine.

Today we have special guests. They will be formally introduced a little later on. They are Pastors Romelio and Maria who serve the congregations in Tijuana with whom we have a relationship. As you know, along with our friends from Meadow Vista, we make a pilgrimage to their churches every year. We pray for them. We minister with them. And today they are here worshiping with us. Many of you who have made the pilgrimage have met them already but today most of you will get to put names to faces. What a great honor and joy to have you with us today! One of the great things about this relationship is that it is one of those ways where we get to discover, again, that church is greater than we usually imagine. It expands beyond Auburn and even the United States. We know that in our heads, but how enriching it is to know that in the relationships we nurture. Romelio and Marina are here not as strangers or visitors but as sisters and brothers in Christ ... co-workers with us in the Kingdom of God.

If you were here in church a few weeks ago, we had that same experience when we met Gerard Muvunyi from our sister parish in Rwanda. We learned

from him, too, that the church is greater and more drives than we normally imagine. We welcomed him not as visitor but brother in Christ.

You see, all of these relationships with the wider church are not just important. They are essential. Sometimes we may think of the church as only the folks with whom we worship, just our own congregation, but we actually belong to something much. When we say that we believe in the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church,” we announce that this church to which we belong includes all of God’s people who claim the faith of Jesus – in all times and in all places. It is easy to get into the mindset that the church is merely the congregation to which I belong. It is easy to imagine that the church is “my church.” But it isn’t. The church belongs to God.

God is always broadening our vision, our sense of identity and we get to understand that we don’t have a mission. No, we are participants in God’s mission in a church and ministry and a kingdom which is always greater than we normally imagine.

I see the church as one of God’s great object lessons. In helping to see and participate in a church that expansive and diverse and multi-layered, we get a vision for God’s work and God’s creation and how life is to be lived; how God intended life to be. For in God’s grand vision the world need not be shrunk down into simply me having what is mine or you having what is yours. In God’s grand vision there are to be no insiders or outsiders, no strangers or outcasts but a humanity united in bonds of love.

Didn’t Jesus come among us to carry out and fulfill that amazing vision of God? Yesterday we celebrated the wedding of Joel and Angela. And the Prayer of the Day began with these words: “Gracious God, you sent Jesus Christ into the world to reveal your love to all people.” Then the prayer and in a real sense, the entire marriage ceremony ask God to bless the couple so that they will reflect this very love. That’s the call of the church! Yet, it seems, at least in the Gospel reading today that even Jesus had forgotten. And it took an outsider, an outcast, the Canaanite woman who pleaded desperately for Jesus to heal her daughter, to help Jesus understand his purpose. The Canaanite woman reminds Jesus to put people first, regardless of status or ethnicity or

class. When the Canaanite woman reminds Jesus, he sees here wisdom, most of all what he sees in her pleading and praying is great faith – the recognition that God’s mercy knows no boundary lines.

And when, in Isaiah, we hear that God’s temple is to be a house of prayer for all people, don’t we get a vision of who God is?

Each Sunday the prayers of the people enlarge our vision, especially if we’ve dwindled prayer down to personal concerns only. Here in the intercessions we are bidden to pray for people in all nations, the church in all places, all who suffer, the church in all of its manifestations, and the stewardship of all creation not just what might belong to you or to me. God is at work in these prayers to enlarge our vision and to be centered in the very heart of God.

Tonight at the Prayer service we will sing a version of an ancient prayer often used at nighttime ... “Watch, O Lord, with all those awake this night, watch, O Lord with all those who weep. Give your angels and saints charge over all who sleep.” The individual bids continue by naming all sorts and conditions of folks in both joy and sorrow. Someone recently told me that her nighttime prayers have changed from “Now I lay me down to sleep...” to this more expansive prayer and through it she has become enlightened to the concerns of God’s heart!

God’s love is large and great and reaches wide ... as wide as arms stretched out on a cross. May we reflect this love in all we do and say and pray. Amen.