

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 9/8/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Did you know that there are more than forty different Lutherans denominations in the United States? When we say “Lutheran” we generally think of, well, us—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or ELCA. Many have some familiarity with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) and a few know of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). And then some have a vague awareness of the synods that broke off or formed from the ELCA like the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) and the American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC). But have you ever heard of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC), or the Reformed Lutheran Church of America (RLCA), or the Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches (ACLIC)?

Why all the different Lutheran denominations? Initially, it was because different groups settling in America spoke different languages so you had Norwegian and Danish and Swedish and German and Finnish synods that formed. After a time, however, their English-speaking children and grandchildren started trying to get together. But then the debates began about what they were going to believe, how they were going to behave, and who could be leaders in their congregations. My grandfather was a pastor in the Gruntvig Synod or Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, which was one of two Danish synods. The other was known as the “Inner Mission” or the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. The Gruntvigians were known as the “happy Danes” because they didn’t object singing and dancing as a way of maintaining their connection to their Danish heritage. The Inner Mission or “sad Danes” were more conservative and looked down on dancing and other entertainments as improper. Eventually, both these synods merged into the predecessors of what is today the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

More recently, conflict among Lutherans has happened over who can be a leader in the church. Though these Lutheran synods agree on the meaning of baptism and communion, and understanding of the Creeds and other teachings of the church, they disagree on who can serve as the pastor of a congregation. A major schism occurred in 1970 when the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) (predecessor of the ELCA) ordained the first Lutheran woman to serve as a pastor. At that point the LCMS and WELS basically turned their backs on the LCA and the American Lutheran Church (ALC). Additionally, women are not permitted to serve on the church councils in either the LCMS and WELS, and the WELS does not permit them to even vote in church meetings.

Often these divisions happen because of interpretation of scripture reading, though this reading can also be selective. For example, regarding the ordaining of women, the more conservative denominations will quote from Paul where he says, “I do not allow a woman to teach men,” and “I do not allow women to speak in church.” Often these positions are handed down for generations and become entrenched in the culture of the church. Others, however, began to look at the larger testimony of scripture rather than picking out specific verse that proved their point. This is what Martin Luther did in the 1500s when he “discovered” the promise of salvation, not through works, but through faith alone, a teaching that contradicted the long-held previous position of the Church. Expanding the examination of scripture led some Lutherans to recognize some significant things that also informed the discussion. First of all, it should be noted that when Paul wrote to Timothy about women in the church, he was speaking for himself regarding the position of women in the congregation (“I do not” vs. “GOD does not”). Second, those words that Paul wrote to Timothy were about the situation in the

specific church that Timothy served and did not necessarily apply to all congregations. And third, Paul recognized and celebrate leadership of women, like Priscilla, a fellow missionary, Lydia, who could be considered the first female pastor through her leadership of the church at Philippi, as well as the ministry of many other women. Further, examining JESUS' interactions with women showed that they very much shared in HIS mission during HIS earthly life, though not as disciples, and that JESUS chose a woman, Mary Magdalene, as the first person to announce the resurrection.

Even within the Lutheran Church, we have different denominations that reflect our disagreements on how to interpret scripture and thus, how we function as congregations and synods. Yet, we should not let these differences cause us to become adversarial in our relationships with each other. (I'll say more about this at another time.) Rather we should recognize what we share in common—our faith in JESUS CHRIST and our unique understanding of salvation by grace through faith—and allow that, not to divide us, but rather to bring us together in our commitment to serve GOD in CHRIST'S name.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey