

August 3, 2014 Our Roots in Generosity

Three weeks ago, I worshipped at St. John Lutheran Church in Meyersville, Texas. It is a congregation founded by my great-great-grandfather, Christoph Adam Sager, in 1851.

In those days, the church was a log cabin. It was built by the handful of members. My great-great-grandfather was a carpenter before he was a pastor, so he built the chair for the front of the church.

I saw the chair in a small church turned into a museum, called The Old Stone Church, that served the congregation from 1866 to 1921.

I also saw his portrait, as well as that of my great-great-grandmother, Justine.

In 1868, he started another congregation, Zion Lutheran Church in Arneckeville.

He died the next year of typhoid fever.

I saw their graves.

They were surrounded by the graves of their nine children, four of whom died in childhood.

It was a hard life back then. People were poor. Life was a risk.

But because of their effort, perseverance, and faith, churches were founded.

It reminds me of the Swedes and the Finns who formed our congregation 120 years ago next month.

Our ancestors in faith couldn't speak the language when they came to the Iron Range...but they could swing a hammer, or pull a saw.

They were not wealthy. They were not landowners.

They were poor people. They were blue collar people.

They had no rights, no unions, no material advantages.

But let me tell you about these people: They figured out generosity.

They knew about working hard...they knew about sacrifice...they knew about charity.

They built churches...hospitals...colleges...orphanages...seminaries...church camps.

This week, I spent three days at a seminary, and two days at a church camp.

I could, because Lutheran Christians of previous generations had learned generosity, and made those places happen.

And you wouldn't be sitting in these pews today, if it weren't for the generosity of your faith ancestors.

We couldn't afford to build this church today.

Are we not wealthier than the earlier generations who did?

I wonder...if we have forgotten our roots.

I wonder...if their life lessons about sacrifice and generosity even in difficult times have been lost in the daily bombardment of messages about the good life.

I wonder...if we are like the Wizard of Oz: Pay no attention to what is behind the curtain. Behind the curtain is our property, our prized possessions...

our lake homes, our toys, our pickup trucks, our vacations, our antiques, our big screen televisions, our jewelry, our 401k's, our sports, fill in the blank.

Pay no attention to what is behind the curtain!

I wonder...if we have the courage and faith to live like our ancestors did...

in a counter cultural way...

the way of giving oneself up for the sake of others out of thanksgiving to God.

The disciples in our Gospel story sound like most people I know.

They sound like you and me.

There they were with a large crowd on their hands, all listening to, being healed by, and receiving the blessing of Jesus.

It was evening. It was time to eat.

They asked Jesus to send the crowds away.

No, he said. You feed them.

We can't, the disciples said.

They are too many! The needs are too great! We don't have enough!

Can you picture yourself saying that to Jesus?

I can.

We live in bondage to scarcity.

We think because we are not millionaires, we don't have enough.

We think because we don't live in Edina, we don't have enough.

We think because we can't satisfy every desire, we don't have enough.

The needs of others are just too great for us to do anything about.

Let them take care of themselves. We don't have enough.

Neither did the people who built our churches, our colleges, our hospitals...

but build them they did.

Our Gospel reading reminds us that you and I and our ancestors of faith live by a different story.

Well...what do you have?

We have five loaves of bread and two fish.

Just barely enough...and not.
But what is that among so many?
Jesus said, That's plenty. You have more than enough. Bring them to me.
As they did, Jesus blessed that small amount of food...
in words that sound very much like Holy Communion.
After blessing, the food was passed around to everyone.
There was food enough for everyone, and food to spare.

There's a reason that this is one of the few miracles and teaching stories
that make it into all four gospels.
It is such a wonderful picture of the grace of God.
God takes our meager resources and proves them more than enough to provide
for ourselves and our neighbors.
The world lives in a spirit of scarcity, but God is a God of abundance.
And we're not talking about a little abundance.
We're talking about baskets of food left over...after everyone has had enough.

At the heart of our faith is the recognition that God is good.
God gives us life as a gift.
Hear again the gifts of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah:
"Listen, eat what is good, delight yourself in rich food.
Listen, so that you may live.
And I will make with you an everlasting covenant."
Hear again the gifts of God as Paul tells us through his letter to the Romans:
"To God's people belong adoption, glory, covenants, the giving of the law,
worship, promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them comes the
Messiah."
God blesses us in so many different ways.
God creates...God provides...God blesses...God gives.
The greatest gift of all is Jesus.
What do we receive in that gift?...forgiveness...mercy...eternal life...
inclusion in the kingdom of God even when we hid behind the curtain.
Life is a gift given to us by God.
That reality calls us to live in a spirit of gratitude for the abundant grace of God.

You and I live by a different story.

We live in a spirit of abundance, because we live in God's grace.

We don't have enough, but we build churches, hospitals, schools, and anything else we can figure out to care for our neighbor.

Because God has blessed us...and provided for us...and given us all things needful.

Because God has give us Jesus.

Because God has called us to be God's hands and feet in the world.

This week, I'm going to send you on a mission.

I'm going to give each of you a fish card.

This week, look for abundance.

Look for ways that people have been fed, with baskets of food left over.

Look for God's abundance this week.

When you see it, write it down briefly in the fish.

Bring the fish with you next week, and we're going to do something special with it.

That's your mission.

May you see baskets of food left over. Amen.