

Holy Cross Lutheran Church

Pastor Dawn Hutchings

Sunday November 16th 2008

The good news proclaimed after receiving news of Holy Cross' suspension:

Micah 6:3-8; Galatians 3:23-29; and Matthew 1-16

"...This is what Yahweh requires of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God."

"...As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

"...You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."

Blessed are you people of Holy Cross.

For yours is the dominion of heaven.

For here in this place I have seen a glimpse of heaven.

Blessed are you people of Holy Cross.

At the beginning of this week our church council and I sat before the Investigative Committee of the Eastern Synod and they gave an account of our actions.

They told our story.

The story of our attempt to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with our God.

You would have been so very proud of the way they represented this congregation.

I was and I am humbled by their steadfast leadership.

I can assure you that our case was pleaded with eloquence, passion and love.

We talked about all the various things that the ELCIC asked us to do and how those actions lead us to this place.

We told them how we responded to the ELCIC's request that we seek to make our congregation a more welcoming place.

We told them how at the urging of the ELCIC we used the Caring Conversation model and invited gays and lesbians and their families to come and tell us their stories of exclusion from the body of Christ that is the church.

We told them that we followed the advice of the ELCIC and we studied what the scriptures have to say.

We told them how after months of prayer and conversation we affirmed that everyone is welcome here at Holy Cross.

We told them how we celebrated becoming a Reconciling in Christ Congregation in a Reconciling in Christ Synod.

We told them some of the things that happened to us when we said that everyone is really welcome here.

We told them about meeting Lionel and Steve.

We told them how we searched our hearts and sought God's guidance before deciding to call our congregation and Lionel to work together and how we so generously support by others to take the extraordinary step of inviting Lionel to serve his internship here.

We told them about our sadness over those sisters and brothers who withdrew from our midst because they could not walk with us.

We told them about the soul searching and agonizing process we went through as a congregation before we decided that it might just be God calling us to ordain Lionel.

We told them about how difficult it was for us to violate our constitution and step out beyond the policies of the ELCIC and call Lionel to be our Associate Pastor .

We told them about Pastor Lionel's extraordinary ministry as he steps out into the ELCIC as an Ambassador of Reconciliation.

We told them about our hopes and dreams for the future of our congregation, and of our love for our sisters and brothers in the ELCIC.

We also confessed to them that we had violated the rules and policies of our church and that we fully understood that the Eastern Synod needed to respond to our violation.

We also told them of the joy we felt when our sisters and brothers of the Eastern Synod gathered in assembly voted to encourage the Synod Council to show restraint in disciplining our congregation.

And then they went away to make their recommendations and we were left hoping and praying that all would be well.

So, it's been a very long week of waiting.

And while we were waiting and hoping and praying the world went about its business.

Life went on.

By Friday, I was a mess.

I pretty much knew what to expect, but I couldn't help hoping.

Hoping that the Gospel would triumph over the law.

We had hoped that the motion that passed overwhelmingly at last summer's Synod Assembly encouraging restraint in discipline would embolden our Bishop and Synod Council to find a creative way to say something like, *"Yes Holy Cross broke the rules and that was wrong, but we agree that the rule itself is wrong and so while we censure them for their actions, we will refrain from applying the letter of the law and work together to change the rule."*

But I'm a cynic by nature and so I tried to steal myself against what I knew might be coming.

I tried to distract myself by tuning out and tuning in.

I watched TV and I surfed the net.

And it was there that I heard the story of Anji Dimitriou and Jane Currie.

These two women are our neighbours, they live just down the way from us in Oshawa.

Anji and Jane are lesbians and while they were picking up their six-year-old son from school the other day, a man attacked them, hurled insults at them and he beat them.

You know you hear about this sort of thing happening and if you're like me you say to yourself, "well thank goodness nothing like that would ever happen here."

Maybe down in the States, but not up here in Canada.

We're not like that here.

But over and over again, in Toronto, in Vancouver and now in Oshawa, it happens.

Gays and lesbians verbally abused, sometimes beaten and in Vancouver killed, all because they were created by God with a desire to love which doesn't conform to somebody's idea of normal.

Late last night, while I was busy trying to convince myself to just to preach the sermon that I wrote back on Monday, my computer made that charming noise it makes when I've received an email.

A friend sent me a link to a news story on CTV about a rally that took place in Oshawa on Friday night.

At the very end of the video the reporter quotes a city official who spoke at the rally.

The report said, "city officials reached out not only to other members of the community, but also to religious leaders asking them to religious leaders asking them to promote inclusion and tolerance."

City officials rarely ask religious leaders to do much of anything, so I set aside the sermon I wrote at the beginning of the week.

And I searched for something to say to you today.

But first I want you to listen to what our Bishop wrote to us and copied to the whole of the ELCIC.

Dear Pastor Dawn and friends,

At its November 13-15, 2008 meeting, the Eastern Synod Council received and took action on the recommendations of the Investigative Committee appointed on September 30, 2008 as per ELCIC Administrative Bylaws, Part II, Sections 2 and 6. Specifically, this committee was asked to investigate and bring recommendations in response to actions taken by your congregation which are contrary to the constitutional requirement that congregations "assure that only those on the roster of this church serve it in a pastoral capacity."

The ruling of the Synod Council is as follows:

- 1. That Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Newmarket be suspended as per the following terms:**
 - **the loss of delegate status at all conference, synodical and national conventions of the ELCIC, and**
 - **the loss of lay and clergy eligibility for election to all governing bodies of the ELCIC.**
- 2. That this suspension not preclude the members of Holy Cross from fully participating in the programmatic and worship life of this church.**
- 3. That this suspension remains in place for the duration of Mr. Lionel Ketola's call to Holy Cross, Newmarket, or until such time as Mr. Ketola's call to Holy Cross is approved through the candidacy process of the ELCIC.**

Should you wish, you may appeal this decision to the ELCIC Court of Adjudication within thirty days of receipt of this communication.

As we have interacted over the several months which have brought us to this present moment, it has been my persistent hope and desire that we would continue to be in relationship,

regardless of the important decisions we have made. This is a commitment that I continue to take very seriously, as indeed does the Eastern Synod Council.

While clear in their resolve to act responsibly in accordance with our church's governing documents, the Synod Council experienced no joy in making this decision. Indeed, it is this Council's expressed desire to responsibly work toward changing policies that preclude the full participation of all God's people in our ecclesial life.

Please know that this communication is accompanied by my prayers and very best wishes, as well as those of the Eastern Synod Council. May God continue to grant us generous gifts of patience, wisdom and mutual forbearance in our shared life.

Your brother in Christ, Michael

So, let me ask a very Lutheran question: What does this mean?

Well, very obviously we are suspended.

Most particularly we are suspended from the governing bodies of the ELCIC and we will remain suspended from those bodies for the duration of Pastor Lionel's call to Holy Cross, or until such time as Pastor Lionel is approved through the candidacy process of the ELCIC.

Did you notice the subtle nuance there?

We are still members of the ELCIC.

And there may come a day when Pastor Lionel is approved.

There's another nuance that bears our attention.

Bishop Michael wrote:

"While clear in their resolve to act responsibly in accordance with our church's governing documents, the Synod Council experienced no joy in making this decision. Indeed, it is this Council's expressed desire to responsibly work toward changing policies that preclude the full participation of all God's people in our ecclesial life.

I read that as our Bishop and our Synod Council stating their intent to work for change.

Those nuances may be subtle, but I point them out to you because I know just how difficult it is for Lutherans to let the Gospel triumph over the law, and in those nuances I hear the Gospel.

Our careful attention to the good order of the church is one of the things that I love about our church.

It's also one of the things that I hate about our church.

And so, despite the nuances of our Bishop's letter, I still feel the full weight of the law crashing down on us.

And it hurts.

It hurts so much that all I want to do is weep.

But as we weep, for Christ's sake, let us cling to the Gospel.

I wish I could share with you the many messages that have come in, thanking the members of Holy Cross for stepping out beyond the law.

There simply isn't time to share all the stories of the people who have contacted us to tell us that they see in us a beacon of hope.

But I do have a message that came in during the wee hours of this morning that I want to share with you.

It comes to us from Washington DC where Pastor Lionel is attending a Lutherans Concerned Training event.

The message is from our dear friend Emily Eastwood:

Dear Friends at Holy Cross,

As you know Pastor Lionel is in Washington, D.C. with me and about 30 other folks from 3 denominations for a weekend Welcoming Church Training. Lionel sits in the front row and has been his usual care-filled spiritually peaceful self, despite the knowledge of what might come today. Shortly after the news came of the suspension with sanctions, we gathered around Lionel for prayer and the laying on of hands. There were many tears among the trainees who have known their own rejection at the hands of the church. We prayed that God would cradle Pastor Lionel, Pastor Dawn, and indeed all of you in gentle arms of deep and confident love and peace. How I wish the whole lot of us could have beamed ourselves to the Holy Cross sanctuary to gather with you for Sunday worship, for the Word, for the Meal that sustains us in such times, for the liturgy of peace where equality is realized even as we live this Lutheran paradox of Law and Gospel.

We will pray for your congregation tomorrow at Reformation Lutheran, in sight of the U.S. Capitol where hundreds marched on Saturday for marriage equality. At the same time the ELCA Church Council will be struggling over a perceived choice between being a prophetic or a unified denomination. Fear and law seem to dominate across our borders. Your congregation and others that have called Extraordinary Pastors and continue to perform same-gender weddings stand in stark contrast. You have not been paralyzed by fear. Rather you have courageously enacted the church as it should be in the present. You have taken a great risk for the sake of justice, for the sake of the Gospel. You have embraced Luther's freedom of the Christian. You have acted on your beliefs. The ultimate outcome is assured. Only the time is in question.

Beloved friends, though we remain miles apart, you are in my thoughts and prayers. Holy Cross is a very special place. You are special people. There is none can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Blessings,
Emily

Our life and ministry here in this place is lived between the times.

As we await the coming of God's realm of justice and mercy how shall we live?

Well we can begin by remembering who we are and whose we are.

We are God's beloved children, blessed and nourished by God who has sent Pastor Lionel into our midst to do great things among us and among our sisters and brothers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

And yes, although we are suspended from governing bodies, we are still members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Suspended members. Salty members.

Indeed we are the salt of the ELCIC.

It's up to us and the salty ones like us to season our church, to give it some added flavor, for without its saltiness the church is good for nothing.

So, we will continue the work of calling our church to be in mission for others.

We will continue the work of calling our church to remember that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

We will continue to call upon the ELCIC to let grace triumph over law.

We will continue to call upon the ELCIC to remember that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; and yes, because we've made it our business around here to study his writings so carefully, I'm sure, even Paul would agree, no gay or straight, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ we are called to: act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God

Dear ones, you are the salt of the Evangelical Church in Canada,
Blessed are you! Blessed is the ELCIC because of you! Amen.