

Thursday October 08, 2009

An Evening of Beer and Theology - A Lutheran Experience

With this description, the Rev. Dawn Hutchings, pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in New Market, Ontario, invited members of her congregation and any interested people in the community at large to join her at this congregation's regular Monday night feature. This activity would not take place in the church, however, but in the second-floor Upper Room of a local pub known as The Crow's Nest. This was the place, she announced, where people would be allowed to participate in a free and open discussion about theology over beer. It was, she said, a "Lutheran Experience." In this discussion no questions would be illegitimate, no challenger would be out of bounds and no attempt to proselytize would occur. This gathering was to be a "come as you are" party, a "come no matter what you believe" occasion. It was one more way this remarkable pastor and this remarkable church sought to engage their community of some 85,000 people.

One does not expect to experience one of the most remarkable congregations I have ever met in a rather quiet community less than an hour north of Toronto in the center of Ontario. By most external measures, Holy Cross Church is not especially impressive. Its frame building looks more like a house than a church. This structure was originally built to be a "Kingdom Hall" for the Jehovah's Witness tradition. When that enterprise folded, it was sold to a Montessori School and only later did the Lutherans buy it and turn it into a church. The entrance level is a large room that serves both as a sanctuary on Sunday and a gathering place for all church activities at other times. One room has been cut into this space to provide a small office for the pastor. On the lower levels are washrooms, a kitchen, additional rooms that house a day care center and storage space. The maximum numbers of worshipers this church can accommodate at one time is 85. The average Sunday attendance is normally about 55. Yet the smallness of their numbers has not limited the largeness of their vision.

The format for these lectures included two presentations of about an hour each followed by another hour of questions and discussion. They were held in the church itself on a Saturday. A box lunch divided the four-hour day into two equal halves. With the capacity of their space limited, they refused to exceed the maximum number they could accommodate and so the class was closed when 85 people had signed up. To accommodate more people in their community and surrounding area, however, they

also arranged for me to do a third lecture open to the public, held on Sunday night in the auditorium of a local school that could accommodate 500 people. That was a remarkable undertaking for this very small church to offer to its community, but the people in that area have learned to expect big things from these Lutherans.

On Sunday morning I was the guest preacher at their regular Sunday service, which gave me a great insight into their understanding of liturgy and worship. True to the of the German Lutheran Church, music plays a large part in this congregation's worship life. Singing is made easy by the fact that both the words and the music are printed in the bulletin so there is no searching through books to find the correct number. In the congregation there were also two male voices of superior and trained ability that made congregational singing a joy to hear. One of these men studied opera and actually toured with an opera company and has recorded CDs on the market. He is a strong tenor and his CD that I have contains most of the familiar chestnuts that tenors regularly sing to the joy of their audiences. Only "O Danny Boy" is missing from his repertoire. The other man also studied voice and is a trained musician. He actually married his accompanist and she is today the musician who accompanies the congregation's singing on the piano. An unvested choir of about six people presents an anthem each week. The words of the hymns are remarkably refreshing, filled as they are with hope and affirmation rather than the guilt, sin, fear and references to the cleansing blood of Jesus that seems to mark so much of Christian hymnody. The music with which this congregation's Sunday worship opened when I was there set a mood of expectation. Beginning the service, we sang:

"Longing for light, we wait in darkness
Looking for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people
Light for the world to see."

The hymn continued for five verses in which the themes of peace and hope for a troubled world were heard and a desire was expressed that they might become "bread broken for others until all are fed." The refrain proclaimed the prayer that Christ might shine in their hearts, shine through the darkness, and concluded with the petition that Christ "might shine in this church gathered today." I thought about other hymns I have endured recently that pronounced me "a wretch" and called me "vile" and spoke of "blood from the veins of Jesus" that might cleanse me of my sins. The contrast was

refreshing.

Another hymn that we sang defined God, not theistically as a supernatural, miracle-working deity who lived above the sky, but as the "Oneness" we seek, the "life that is part of us," and as the "love and the joy that makes us whole." It was a joy to be enveloped in those words.

When we came to the "affirmation of faith" it was not the convoluted words of the fourth century Nicene Creed that seeks to build security fences to keep out heresy, but was something the people of the congregation worked on to define their faith in words they could understand. Yet it still contained all of the marks of historic Christianity, including references to God as creator; Christ as the Incarnation of love to whom his disciples responded, "My Lord and my God;" and as the Holy Spirit who was defined quite biblically as breath, the wind of God, the giver of life and as holy wisdom. It was, however, open, affirming and joyously proclaimed. "We are a community of faith," this affirmation began, and then what their faith meant was spelled out: We share a vision of God, whose spirit is love. We search for the meaning of God in our experience. We share a vision of Jesus, who "forgave those who crucified him," who in the "mystery of the resurrection continues to live even more profoundly through the ages," and who calls us to be reconciled with the whole of creation. The congregation acknowledged that the Holy Spirit bids them "to cry out for justice for the powerless and oppressed and to see the presence of God in every created thing." Their creed concluded with these words: "We reach out to one another for strength beyond our own. This is our community. This is our faith." I found myself inspired and enfolded as I repeated these words.

When the time came for the prayers, the phrase "Lord have mercy" was mercifully absent. That phrase is little more than the petition of a beggar before the righteous judge, and it serves to relate the worshiper to an authoritarian God who does little more than fill worshippers with a sense of guilt and failure. The response of the people in these prayers on that particular Sunday was the ringing affirmation "Let it be so!" They prayed to let the beauty of creation inspire them to walk lightly upon the earth, so that they might be empowered to end to greed, violence and war. They prayed that they might embody the gifts of eternal life and seek justice for all, that wholeness might be their goal and that they might walk in the ways of love. I was almost shouting "Let it be so!" when the prayers ended in the sharing of the peace.

The Communion table was open. No external barriers were erected. No one said this sacrament is for the baptized only, the confirmed only, Catholics only, Christians only. It was open to all who were hungry for what God means. The Lord's Prayer was sung in such a way as the constant refrain was heard, "Let the will of God be done on earth as in heaven." The communion hymn announced that God is in our questions as well as in our answers and that the sacrament draws those who are many throughout the world into one bread and one body gathered for the sake of the world.

The closing hymn was the prayer of St. Francis, "Make me the channel of your peace, where there is hatred, let me sow love." The traditional God who is so often located above the sky in our liturgies was now located inside the worshipers who were to be the channels through which the love of God engaged history. Obviously the one presiding over the Eucharist faced the people, for that is where God is to be found. God's dwelling place was not "up there" or "out there," but in the midst of the people.

I left that church elated, refreshed, committed and filled with joy. My life had been affirmed and I had been stretched to a new level of humanity. I was no longer a "miserable offender" who was not worthy "to gather up the crumbs" from the divine altar. It would almost be worth it to commute to Holy Cross Lutheran Church in New Market, Ontario, to attend worship each Sunday. There I got a vision of what a church is supposed to be.

– John Shelby Spong

Note: Those who wish to know more about this church may visit its Web site at www.holycrosslutheran.ca. Better still, write a note of encouragement and affirmation to the Reverend Dawn Hutchings at pastordawn@holycrosslutheran.ca. That can be your positive and life-affirming deed of the day.