



February 27, 2008

Holy Cross Lutheran Church: A Jewel in the Frozen North

The wind chill factor was minus 25 degrees. Snow showers fell regularly on the already icy white countryside. It was not the time one would normally visit Newmarket, Ontario, a town about fifty minutes due north of Toronto, but I had been invited by the Holy Cross Lutheran Church, a congregation of less than forty families, to give two addresses, one in their Sunday liturgy and the other before a sold out audience in a 350-seat public auditorium.

The Lutheran Church in Canada does not have a strong presence in this gracious land to our north. Religiously speaking, Canada is dominated by three major Christian groups: the Anglicans, who are primarily the descendants of the first English settlers; the United Church of Canada, a Protestant tradition that came into being in the early 1920's with a merger of predominantly Scottish Presbyterians with predominantly English Methodists; and the Roman Catholics, who are fairly localized in the French-speaking province of Quebec. The Canadian Lutherans tend to have ethnic ties to Germany and the nations of Scandinavia, but are now attracting people from Canada's beautiful and increasingly diverse population. I have given lectures in Canada two or three times a year since 1988. In all of those Canadian opportunities, however, I had met only one Lutheran, so I had no idea what to expect when we accepted this Lutheran invitation to come to central Ontario in February. I was in for one of the great surprises and most exciting assignments in my entire career.

Arriving on Saturday night, we stayed at a lovely rustic bed and breakfast in a two-acre plot of land in the sparsely-populated countryside. It was run by Tom and Maryann Doherty, who are members of Holy Cross Lutheran Church. Tom met us at the airport and took us to this B & B, where Maryann had prepared dinner. Both of these industrious people have multiple careers. Tom, who is 50 years old, is an ordained Lutheran pastor who is doing interim work in the area, but counts Holy Cross as his own parish church. He recently interrupted his ordained career for three years to pursue his ambition to become an opera singer. It was a powerful growing experience for him, but was probably entered too late in his life to be a realistic dream. It left him, however, with wonderful memories and with a beautifully trained voice that will still enrich the lives of many. What struck me most about Tom and Maryann was their excitement when talking about Holy Cross Church, their enthusiasm about their minister, the Rev. Dawn Hutchings, and their genuine joy about ministry. This was no jaded ordained man. I began to find out why as this weekend unfolded.

To that "Welcome to Newmarket" dinner the Dohertys had invited their pastor, Dawn Hutchings, and the woman with whom she shares her home, Carol Wagler. Over dinner the story of the church poured out as we listened. Holy Cross is a congregation

committed to becoming a new thing. While this church's respect for the past is genuine, its people seem to know instinctively that they cannot live in that past. Their vocation is to break new ground and enter the enchanted future. They are quite intentional about doing just that. Yesterday's theology, which focuses on original sin, the blood sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as the necessary path to salvation and the supernatural, miracle-working God who lives above the sky, simply doesn't work for them. The liturgy had to reflect a new way to approach the holy so they work on liturgy constantly. They also live out their faith dramatically. Recently they sold their parsonage since their pastor preferred to own her own home. They sent 10% of that sale to the National Canadian Lutheran Church for its ministry and with the balance began to enrich adult education with a speakers' series and other outreach programs. Members of this church are currently involved in a hands-on building project of a six-room school in a small town in northern Ghana in West Africa with a group from the congregation now there completing the project. The fact that this pastor is a woman indicates that there is no debate over that issue. They were, however, judging from the conversation around the dinner table, also open to gay and lesbian people, to the insights of other faith traditions, and to a quest for new biblical knowledge, even that which relativizes traditional assumptions. I went to bed that night eager to see if the next day this church could possibly live up to its advance notices. It did.

The church began to fill up 45 minutes before the service started. Its members represented a range from eager children to senior citizens, but the majority appeared to fall into the 40-50 age bracket. It was obvious that the members of this church had significant ownership of its life. The liturgy was shared between pastor and lay worship assistants. The volunteer choir was spectacular. The lessons were well read and focused on the penitential season of Lent. Tom Doherty's opera-trained voice blended beautifully with the vigorous congregational singing, but also allowed others to turn their own volume up a bit.

The thing that made this service so special to me, however, was the Sunday bulletin that announced coming events. This church was not ever going to occupy a "ghetto" called religion. One announcement told of a weekly meeting at a local pub called "The Crow's Nest" for those who would like to "rethink Christianity." It was entitled "Wine, Beer, Conversation and God," and was a weekly forum where those turned off by the traditional church might come. Here there were no theological boundaries, nor was any question or comment considered illegitimate. This Christian church wanted to meet people in this non-church setting, whose non-traditional journeys they were ready to affirm and whose secular searches they wanted to legitimize. There was no hidden conversion agenda.

The second announcement was about an "Adult School" on the Sundays of Lent that would focus on the Apostle Paul. That in and of itself was not unusual, but when people read the titles of the weekly sessions this bulletin announced they found these topics: "Did Paul invent Christianity?" "Do the Writings of Paul Trump the Teachings of Jesus?" "What Was the Thorn in Paul's Side?" "Is Paul a Friend or Foe of Women?" "Didn't Paul Like Sex?" One got the quick impression that this was not the typical Bible class! This invitation further urged the people to bring their questions. This congregation did not traffic in set answers. Other announcements contained an invitation to attend a documentary entitled "For the Bible Tells Me So" that featured Gene Robinson, the Episcopal Church's openly gay bishop; Peter Gomes, the gifted preacher at Harvard's

Memorial Church, who is also openly gay; and Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Church's champion of many justice causes. Finally, there was an invitation to attend a "Broadway Revue," put on to raise money for the benefit of the school that the church was building in Ghana. With this bulletin stating the context for this church's life, it came as no surprise that when the Sunday liturgy came to the Creed it was not the fourth century words from Nicea that were recited, but rather the following:

"We believe in God, who made the world, loves it and smiles upon it, We believe in Jesus Christ, who has shown us the human face of God, and a love that refused to be limited, who calls us to a life that even death cannot end. We believe in the Holy Spirit through whom God reaches us, surprising, prompting and questioning us; who is the life breath of creation; and the source of nurture, humor and hope.

We believe in ourselves as people made in the divine image, capable of great creativity and great destruction, but called to choose between them.

We believe that Christ leads us now, calling us to a life that is absurd by the standards of the world; calling us to resist evil, including anything that would degrade or destroy another and to create and protect love, justice, freedom and peace."

How real! How superior to "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father," words that reflect quite well the heresy battles of the fourth century, but which leave the modern worshipper with a glazed-over look.

When we came to the Lord's Prayer, we prayed these words:

"God, lover of us all, Most Holy One, help us to create what you want for us here. ." Give us today enough for our needs. Forgive our weak and deliberate offences just ." as we must forgive others when they hurt us."

Help us to resist evil and to do what is good; ."

For we are yours, endowed with your power to make the world whole." ."

Newmarket is not a major Canadian city. It is not even a major city in the Province of Ontario. Holy Cross Lutheran Church is thus a small church in a small town, but what incredible power emanates from that congregation. Most of the small Christian churches in both the United States and Canada are discouraged. They feel impotent to impact the modern world. They are shackled with the vestiges of yesterday that find expression in scripture and liturgy. They feel like the mystical Sisyphus as they seek to roll that mighty stone uphill. I invite those churches to look at, correspond with, visit, get on the mailing list of and be inspired by Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Newmarket, Ontario. What I found there will energize my life for years. When I left they were preparing to welcome John Dominic Crossan later this year.

John Shelby Spong