

There were about 40 of us ELCA pastors at this conference a couple weeks ago: all serving with congregations with their own unique stories, along with their interesting quirks (all of them except Divinity Lutheran Church in Parma Heights, Ohio, of course). Not to mention the pastors themselves with their own unique stories and their interesting quirks (all except this one, of course). And most likely all of those pastors blessed with this Gospel text on this Reformation Sunday for all the quirky Lutherans around the world to hear, including that precious line, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

And if we are honest with our Lutheran selves, part of our truth is that there is fear, and not just out there, but in the church, too; because, well...we don't know what's going to happen next. We don't know what will happen after the Sunday school teachers who have selflessly dedicated their Sabbath mornings to shape and mold the curious hearts and minds of children for years and years: we don't know what will happen after they no longer can do it. We don't know what will happen after those who, on short notice, must prepare sanctuaries and fellowship halls for funerals and luncheons, and it just somehow, someway always gets taken care of so that the rest of us don't have

to worry about it. We don't know what will happen next when they can no longer serve. We don't know what will happen after musicians and ushers and committee members who just always stepped up to seemingly every task asked of them time and time again. If we are honest with our Lutheran selves and so many other parts of the body of Christ, there is some fear there.

And yet, I remember a few years ago, when one of our synod bishops said of my generation, that we, in a way were blessed having not experienced the time of the church that needed folding chairs setup to accommodate the masses showing up on Sunday mornings. We weren't around for the time when you had to show up hours before in order to get your seat in the sanctuary that has been occupied by your family since the beginning of time. That maybe not having that in our memory bank is a blessing for a time such as this. Now, I do remember Christmas Eves and Easter mornings, when the pews were mostly full, but there would always be a few spots here and there for the late arrivals, for the not-so-sures, for the curious, for those with hesitation, for those with, well, maybe just a little bit of fear. There would always be space for all of them, just in case they wanted to catch a glimpse of a truth that would set them free from it all.

Nevertheless, I also do remember in college, an ELCA-affiliated one at that, that on most Sabbath mornings, there would only be 20 in worship at most. And I remember this odd mixture of feelings and emotions, wondering where everyone else was even though I knew full well that most 20-somethings prefer a bit of recovery time after the previous evening festivities. I remember starting to wonder about the church as a whole, including its future. But I also remember, somehow, someway, still experiencing holiness and breath-taking beauty and the blessed assurance Gospel amidst only a few here and there amidst the massive chapel space. I remember never regretting making the trek there, because I still felt God in that space. I remember fear not being the overriding emotion felt on those still-memorable Sunday mornings.

But back to that conference of about 40 of us ELCA pastors, with a fair share of my generation represented. Part of the truth for us is that even amidst some fear whether spoken out-loud or not, truly I tell you amidst my generation, there still is fervent passion and relentless joy and a stubborn Lutheran commitment to God and the body of Christ and congregations with all their unique stories and interesting quirks.

Because even though we may not have experienced folding chairs in sanctuaries and having to plot out arrival times well before preludes started, we still experienced our own memorable holiness and breath-taking beauty and the blessed assurance Gospel. And we don't want that to go away either for us and those to come after us.

Back when some of us were in seminary, and the forecast for us Protestants wasn't exactly brimming with happiness, our professors would never say it out-loud, but there was almost this not-so-subtle worry and fear, almost as if it was about to be our job to go out and save the church. Except, part of the truth that will set us free is that Jesus Christ already more than took care of all of that. The body of Christ has already been more than won over in love, when fear did its absolute best to take over the world, and the Son of God insisted otherwise out of a tomb that tried to silence all the holiness and beauty and the Gospel itself forever.

So, no, the church doesn't need saved, but it is also blessed with the Greatest News to share with a world that needs it as much as ever before. Trust us, my generation is fully aware of that, and yes, we are exchanging ideas with that fervent passion to best navigate this terrain, but we know it

isn't up to us alone. We know that Christ is still Risen indeed with a relentless joy for such a time as this. And we are fully aware that we stand on the massive shoulders of giants, and by no means are all of those faithful giants gone. So many are still leading Sunday schools and preparing sanctuary and fellowship hall spaces and singing and bell-ringing and ushering and committee-serving, because the Holy Spirit will not back down from firing within all of us, as long as our stubborn Lutheran bodies can stand it. We are fully aware that one generation does not have all the gifts, but that from the youngest to eldest of life, there is just as much God living in each of them to still impact congregational and communal life and beyond. We know we still have the Greatest News to offer to the world, including to those who are hesitant if it's really for them, for those who aren't so sure about the whole church thing, for those dealing with their fair share of fear. But the truth that will set us all free is truth for all humanity: "Nothing can happen in this life to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," in 1st century Palestine, in 16th century Germany, and for the times such as these. So, for that still Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed!

Amen!