

IN EVERY AGE

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

This year, at its Churchwide Assembly in the Lutheran heartland of Minneapolis, Minnesota, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the largest Lutheran body in this nation, acted as the church of Martin Luther and reformed itself. At long last, at long, long last, we are a church that affirms the full humanity of homosexual people as well as that of heterosexual people in saying that homosexual people living in committed relationships are welcome candidates for every office in the ELCA. The struggle to arrive at this declaration has been going on forever and in its present incarnation is some 30 years long. It has been a struggle against fear and hence a struggle against lovelessness, which is what fear is, and the fear that is homophobia not least of all. It has been a struggle against ignorance in the sense of the failure of people to recognize the homosexual people with whom they live and who think about homosexual people in terms of heterosexist stereotypes; and ignorance in the sense of people who do not know how to read the Bible and as a consequence have used that document to deny the full humanity of homosexual people. These struggles against fear and ignorance in the church are by no means over, but the vote last August at the Assembly of the ELCA is an important and, I would say, in many ways decisive step forward for the church in realizing its calling to be the body of Christ in the world. It's as if a new covenant has been made between the God of all and the ELCA, a covenant that has been written in the

hearts of some and which is now to be written into the documents of the ELCA for future generations, a new covenant for the reformation of the church... again.

When Emanuel Lutheran Church, the church of which I am pastor, became a Reconciling in Christ congregation more than a dozen years ago, the congregation actually *experienced* one of the most fundamental teachings of the New Testament: i.e., that the truth of Christ will make you free. I remember well that morning in the sanctuary when the representatives of Lutherans Concerned, North America came and presented the congregation with the certificate marking the decision of Emanuel to be a Reconciling church; and I remember the generally felt sense in the congregation that morning that the love of Christ was more powerful than fear and that we had as a congregation had been set from the fear that is homophobia to love our homosexual neighbors. We acted as Christians. We acted as Lutherans. We were reforming, and it was a wonderful day in the life of the congregation. Sad to say, we lost a few members as a result of the action, some of whom were probably in the wrong congregation to begin with. This was regrettable as it was regrettable when we lost a few members for opening up the social hall to serve dinners to hungry and homeless people in an action that would eventually become the important ministry of Elijah's Promise. We lost some members, but we gained other members who have done so much to make Emanuel a more faithful congregation. And we were set free.

Emanuel was the only Reconciling in Christ church in the New Jersey Synod for about three or four years. It is a congregation that has a history of taking steps forward and standing apart. If not the first, Emanuel was one of the very first Lutheran congregations to call as its pastors a married couple. Carol Goldstein was one of the first

women ordained in the Lutheran Church in America, our predecessor body. I knew her husband, Bob Goldstein, before I knew about Emanuel. He was working on his doctorate in Princeton at roughly the same time I was there working on mine. In time, Bob and Carol and their daughters moved to another congregation and eventually divorced.

Speaking of the recent Assembly vote in an interview in *Concord*, the magazine of Lutherans Concerned, North America, Bob Goldstein said the following: "...I feel kind of helpless about people threatening to leave the church, and look to God for help in building bridges.' At the same time, Bob could not help reflecting on "how many have been turned away from the church because of who they are.'" Bob is today "the lead pastor of St. Francis Lutheran Church in San Francisco, rostered with Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries. That congregation was one of two in that city removed from the ELCA in 1996 for calling and ordaining a gay man and a lesbian couple" as their pastors

Bob goes on to say, "Forty years ago I knew I was gay, but there were no models to follow except to hide it. So I decided to go through the route of deception.' He was married for 19 years. He chose to be openly gay, 'though a little guarded' in 1995." Speaking of the people in the ELCA who feel the church is on the wrong path in its recent vote, Bob Goldstein said with characteristic grace, "I think of the many times we've been hurt by the assembly, so we know what they're feeling."

But why has there been so much hurting over the question of someone's sexuality? Why is this, of all things, a bone of contention in the church?

In many ways, the struggle over human sexuality in the church is like Luther's struggle with Rome in the 16th century. In that struggle, Luther was up against forces in the church that said, "We alone know how to be Christian and we alone possess what is

necessary for a person to win the favor of God. Luther's opponents had a particular way of interpreting the Bible, along with the conviction that Jesus had specifically ordained the Bishop of Rome and his minions as the final authorities in the church on matters of faith and salvation. Luther increasingly came to feel that the church in which he was a monk and a doctor was operating as had the Pharisees with whom Jesus argued in stories in the New Testament. The words of St. Paul, which for Luther characterized the gospel of Christ, stood in stark contrast to the dogma and the practice of the Roman church: we are, according to Paul, justified by God's grace which we receive by faith. That is to say, we are loved into being by God; we are the creatures of divine love, which is nothing that we merit or earn, because love is not something that is merited or earned. This we take on faith, as we do that the appropriate response to this love is love for God and for God's creation of which we are a part. This, for Luther, was the essence of the Christian faith and the substance of the Christian life.

Homosexual people have traditionally been told that their sexuality is unjustified, that there is no natural warrant for affections toward a person of the same sex, and that it is just perverse desire to feel this way. What, we might ask, is the warrant for heterosexuality? That members of the opposite sex can make children, who it is, of course, presumed will be heterosexual children. Sexuality is thereby unjustified unless it is heterosexuality. But whose rule is this? Is this God's rule, the God whose love is freely given to us as the creatures of grace? I don't think so. It is merely the rule of the church that has perversely set limits on the love of God as if to say, "Just so far and no farther does this love go." This is essentially a faithless act on the part of the church, faith being the way we take hold of God's grace, the way we receive it. It is a corruption

of the Christian understanding of God and a sign of the need for reform for the institution so corrupted.

This year, the Lutheran church in the form of the ELCA has something to celebrate on Reformation Day beyond an anniversary of something that occurred long ago. This year the church has acted in a way that is Lutheran and Christian in reforming itself. Critics of this reforming are right to fear it, as were Jesus' opponents in the New Testament, as was the Pope and his loyalists in Luther's day. There is no telling what people set free from the bondage of falsehood will do next and what reformations they will go on to accomplish. In the words of the wonderful hymnwriter, Fred Pratt Green:

The church of Christ in every age
beset by change but spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.

Happy Easter! Amen.

Reformation Sunday, October 25, 2009

Emanuel Lutheran Church/ Campus Ministry at Rutgers