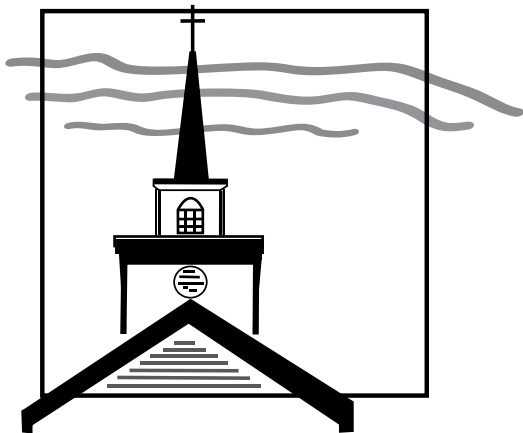


AMERICAN LUTHERAN HISTORY
IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS
OF THE CONGREGATION

L. DeAne Lagerquist



The following four selections are part of an ongoing project to stimulate Lutherans to write about their lives of faith. More specifically, these were written at a workshop that gathered women who came of age during the second wave of feminism and Lutheran entry into the American mainstream. This small sample highlights congregational worship, family life, critical thought, and awareness of the world as central components of Lutheran sensibility.
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The Sermon
Ingrid Christian

The sermon in my childhood was something to be endured.

My cousin Julie got to put her head in her mom's lap. Her mom would rub her thumb over Julie's eyebrows until she was hypnotized. That's what came from being the baby in a long line of kids.

My mom did no such thing for the five of us. We were to sit up straight, not wiggle, not quarrel, look forward, sing when they sang, follow the liturgy along page by page in the hymnal, and, in short, *behave*.

The sermons were the longest part. Relief came in the person of my father, ever the dancing spirit. He began writing sermon comments and questions in the margins of the Sunday bulletin. He would surreptitiously hand the bulletin (only one page in those days; a person was expected to know how to find the liturgy in the hymnal) down the line to his children. In tiny handwriting, around the margins, were his questions and comments, funny, impious, and irreverent.

We would eagerly await these missives—gifts of light and humor—which broke the monotony. Of course, they also taught. I believe the first, best lesson in church was surely this: the preacher does not know everything, is not always right, and in fact is sometimes a fool. We should use our brains, trust our judgment, and not be intimidated—even though the church, Trinity Lutheran in Moorhead, was huge, august, and somewhat overwhelming.

I remember very few sermons from those days, but the

conversations at Sunday dinner were reliably lively, and the messages of the margin notes were not lost on us.

Two sermons do stick out in my mind. When I was quite young, Pastor Earling Jacobson, still a young man, preached on the houses built on sand versus those built on rock. He had a table near the altar, with actual sand on it. A play house slid off the pile of sand and I thought it quite splendid. It made the Bible story very clear.

The other sermon, when I was probably in junior high school, was preached by Pastor Oscar Anderson. What I remember is that he was preaching about justice for the poor. He was very passionate. He spoke of Jesus loving the poor. And he cried. It was clear to me that he was crying for us, his people, and that he as our shepherd was angry and saddened that we didn't do anything, didn't take action.

I don't know what the particulars were—what the gospel lesson was—just that Pastor Anderson, whom our family respected, was passionate enough to cry about justice for the poor.

You can bet that we talked about that sermon at Sunday dinner that noon, as we ate our stewed chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and canned peas.

We were learning what was important in life, and it wasn't canned peas.

Sunday Mornings
Mary Solberg

I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I didn't go to Sunday School and church before I left home for college. Actually, I don't think I'd even need a whole handful of fingers. Today I can say something like, "Not going to church was not an option." Then, a phrase like that wouldn't even have occurred to me.

I remember reading the personal information sheet Dad had filled out for Mom at the request of the caregivers at Highgate, the assisted living residence my parents moved to some years ago. The point of the sheet was to help the young women who "befriended" and cared for the residents of the Cottage—the Alzheimer's unit at Highgate—get to know and respond more attentively to their elderly

charges, most of whom could no longer say much of anything about themselves, because they no longer “knew” themselves in any but the most elusive sense. Dad had lovingly filled out the whole set of questions. And when he came to the question, “What does your loved one like to do?” he wrote, “June loves to go to church.”

When we came home from church, having gone to Sunday School, fellowship hour, choir warm-up, and the service—which almost always lasted more than an hour—we’d take off and hang up our coats. Mom and I would move into the kitchen to start preparing Sunday dinner: often broiled chicken, fresh frozen green peas, rice, a green salad, and some wonderful fluffy dessert. It was always both delicious and beautiful to look at as we seven sat down at the dining room table.

Paring knife poised over the salad fixings, Mom would say to me, “Let’s find out what Dr. Fredrickson has to say.” I’d turn on the small plastic console radio under the cabinets and tune it to the station that carried the service from First Baptist Church. Our timing was usually perfect: Dr. Fredrickson’s voice usually came on within minutes. His voice wasn’t “sermonic”—you know, that voice that betrays the speaker’s self-consciousness (and often self-importance) of occupying an Important Place and bearing a Heavy Responsibility to say something of Great Moment. His voice was measured, pleasant, clear, and reasonable. And almost without fail, he said something that my mother thought worth listening to. I don’t really remember whether I took to his sermons the way my mother did, but I remember quite vividly how impressed—and, it was clear, grateful—she was to hear what Dr. Fredrickson had to say each Sunday morning.

In later years, I wondered often how my parents, both intellectually gifted and socially conscious, managed to sit through *years’* worth of mediocre sermons, Sunday after Sunday, especially when they knew from their own experiences in the world how much there

was to know, to care for, and to care about throughout God’s wide world. I’m quite sure they felt a deep and energetic, even holy obligation (the kind one dedicates oneself to when one takes holy orders, for example) to bring their family to worship each Sunday. What else could have prevailed against the challenges they faced those mornings?

Pew Whisperers
Anne Bayse

Everyone knows that Lutherans are nice. Garrison Keillor says so. An old boyfriend with Methodist roots and UCC leanings agrees: the people who truly loved and cared for him during his most desperate periods, he insists, were all Lutheran. Sometimes I imagine God glancing over His denominations and thinking, “Those Lutherans... they sure are nice.”

But I’m descended from another flange—the mean Lutherans. The ones who snicker in the pews and take communion with crossed fingers. Who regard the niceness of their fellow Lutherans with some suspicion and not a little snobbery. Who sometimes aren’t really sure why they’re there.

We were big pew whisperers. Whatever was happening around us,

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someone had a comment. My mother would critique the sermon or wince when the organist switched on the tremolo. After her campaign work for Eugene McCarthy came to nothing, after the night RFK walked through the kitchen into a bullet, her idea of a campaign shrank. No more door-to-door precinct work; instead, she would go church to church bribing organists to lay off the tremolo stop.

My father whispered, too, but it was about permission, not derision. He let his sideburns grow a little longer, squared his shoulders, and dared to come to church in a white turtle-

neck and corduroy sport coat instead of the standard suit and tie. One Sunday when it was his turn to lector, the Old Testament reading was too bloodthirsty and violent for him, an opponent of the Vietnam War. “I can’t read that,” he whispered. “I’m going to skip those lines.” He wouldn’t sing “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” either.

While we were sneering at others in the pews, our aunts and uncles were sneering at us. They weren’t even Lutheran anymore. My mother’s sisters had married bona fide members of the Church of England—one from Scotland and one from Winnipeg. While we lived in a big valley town in the house my grandfather had built for his Luther League bride, they lived in coastal homes that featured picture windows and large swaths of redwood trim. Our dining room table had been our grandmother’s and cleaved to the Early American tradition. Their dining room tables were long and baronial, suggesting tankards of mead and sumptuous medieval banquets. We still sang “Tryggare Kan Ingen Vara.” They listened to albums by the King’s College Chapel Choir.

“Why do your parents insist on staying Lutheran?” my aunt Elisabeth would say. “It’s so dowdy and depressing. You should all become Episcopalians.”

We never would, because of Papa, my grandfather. Christine and Elisabeth lived in other towns near university campuses. We lived in Papa’s house. Papa lived in an apartment around the corner, but he and his Buick showed up for doughnuts or dinner several times a week. Papa had always been Lutheran and always would be, and so would we.

We were a family of always. We always went to church. Afterwards, we always went to Vic’s Ice Cream for lunch. We always went to the symphony. We always lived on 11th Avenue. We always went to Washington in the summer, to stay on the farm, the farm we had always had. Papa had always been a doctor. My father had always been a lawyer and always at the same

firm. My mother had always—okay, almost always—lived in Sacramento. I was growing up in California, a place not usually associated with the word “always.” But to us, California was always everything. Just like being Lutheran.

Article 7: The Church
L. DeAne Lagerquist

The church of my childhood was the smaller, newer congregation on the university side of town. Founded after the World Wars, it had neither an old building nor an ethnic culture. The sanctuary was stark and modern with the font in the back to remind us that we entered the body of Christ by dying with him. When the new building went up, the original worship space was converted to a fellowship hall with accordion dividers to make Sunday school classrooms. The parsonage was just across the street, so its basement was easily used for more classrooms.

Every Wednesday of every Lent we went to church in the dark. No sun came in through the long windows on the pulpit side of the church. All the light was from inside. Before the service proper began, there was a hymn sing. Children too, if they were quick and had a loud voice, could ask for a specific hymn from any season of the liturgical year. We could even ask for a Christmas carol and the single verse we preferred. If we didn't know the number but did know the first line, we could look up the number in the back of the hymnal. In those days we were using the old red *Service Book and Hymnal*. I didn't know that there would be other hymnals someday, so learning the numbers seemed worthwhile. Like #77, a Lenten hymn. “There is a green hill far away, without a city wall, where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all.”

Another Lenten classic was, “Print thine image pure and holy...” I've forgotten the number for that one; nevertheless, the image was imprinted on me those dark Lenten nights and Lenten Sundays when “Print thine

image” was the regular offertory. This hymn uses the metaphor of imprinting an image, as when the image of the ruler was pressed into ancient coins. Ignatius of Antioch, en route to his martyrdom, wrote to the church at Magnesia-on-the-Meander, near Ephesus, urging the faithful, “In love bear the stamp of God the Father, through Jesus Christ.” This would prepare them to face the death that comes to us all.

After the Lenten hymn sing, we went on to the main service and the sermon. Usually the sermons were in a series, perhaps about a single book of the Bible or about the Catechism. They were more instructional than Sunday sermons; now I might call them more didactic than inspirational, though that doesn't mean that the Wednesday sermons were dull or that the Sunday ones didn't teach.

“Make me like you, dear Jesus,” we were all praying week after week in Lent; but the truth is that the congregation makes us like itself. On both Wednesdays in Lent and Sundays through the whole year, the congregation impressed on me the expectation that a Christian is smart, wants to

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learn, has a favorite hymn, knows how to use the index to find other hymns, and will be allowed every Lenten Wednesday the opportunity to have the whole congregation sing one verse of that favorite hymn inside a room filled with light.

Wednesdays were “church night” the whole year long, not just in Lent. Confirmation classes happened on Wednesdays in the fellowship hall. One evening after class, I was talking to Pastor Benbow about an adolescent sort of question. I wanted to understand what is required if one is to be

forgiven by God. I do not think that I had any particular sin in mind. I had not done anything bad. I was not feeling guilty or anxious. I was interested, curious. Must one be sorry, I wondered, for the act itself, or is it enough to be sorry for the outcomes of one's action? The question was abstract and yet seemed to matter in a real way even if it was not of immediate personal consequence.

Pastor Benbow stood there for a long time, on the sidewalk, stopped on his way home to the parsonage across the street. He listened to me try the question in various ways.

I'd also wanted to know what could be done for an emergency baptism in the desert where there is no water. “Would orange juice do?” I asked. I kept asking these questions about the mechanics of the sacrament. I kept wondering how grace works. I did not ask what these things meant for me, but the assumption behind my questions about how grace works was that it *did* work. In retrospect I suppose that I was trying to be certain that God's love was as big as I had been told.

I do not remember precisely what Pastor Benbow said, but I know for certain that he stood there for a long time and listened to me. He did not say, “I have to go home now,” though he surely could see the parsonage across the street. He probably wanted to go home after teaching confirmation to a score of ninth graders fueled by sweet baked goods and hormones. He probably was hungry and his wife would have had dinner ready. Nonetheless, he stood there on the sidewalk late on that spring afternoon, listening to me try my questions this way and that way.

In fact, I do not remember anything he said, but I know that I did not have to apologize for asking questions that kept him from his dinner. LF

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