



Office of the Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Celebrating Full Communion

The United Methodist Church • Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

All Saints Sunday

November 1, 2009

Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church, Minneapolis, Minn.

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Sermon texts: *Isaiah 25: 6-9 • Revelation 21: 1-6a • John 1: 32-34*

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

What a joy and honor it is to join in this service of thanksgiving to God for the relationship of full communion between the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Thank you, Bishop Sally Dyck, for your leadership in the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Thank you, Pastor Bruce Robins and the people of Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church, for your hospitality. Thank you, ELCA Minnesota bishops, for your leadership and for your presence today. My thanks to all of the ecumenical leaders who have joined in this celebration.

What a joyous occasion to give thanks for all the saints who have prayed and labored for greater expressions and experiences of our unity in Christ. But please let me be very clear: I do not believe that full communion between the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is for the sake of our survival. Oh yes, I know religious pundits and prognosticators have long ago predicted our demise as denominations. Some seem to imply by the phrase “post-denominational era” that we are pretty much dead and gone. Well, I am sorry if I seem just a bit impatient about our death being prematurely pronounced, but full communion is not about two church bodies deciding to share one tomb, one cave of death.

The results of some 30 years of dialogue, the document “Confessing Our Faith Together,” and the texts of our full communion agreement adopted by our assemblies, are not bands with which we will now wrap ourselves so that we might be preserved at least a bit longer.

Full communion is not for our mummification because being entombed in a cave of death is no place for Christ's Church. Sometimes I wonder if Jesus is weeping over his church today, just as he wept with Mary and others at the tomb of Lazarus. When deeply held differences become cause for divisions, rather than occasions for deeper dialogue, it must grieve our Lord. When suspicions and distrust become pervasive and turn into cynicism and sarcasm, then we give off the stench of death, not the aroma of new life in Christ.

In his greeting to our August churchwide assembly, Dr. Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, reminded us that our unity is a gift rooted in the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments. Dr. Noko said, “This is God's own work and our hands are to serve that unity... we therefore cannot use our hands to pull apart God's costly work....the church is the body of Christ, a creature of the Gospel and, therefore, not ours to dismember.” That is why we have come to this day and to our relationship of full communion.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, are we becoming so turned inward, so preoccupied with our own survival, so divided over human sexuality, so diminished in our capacity to be in mission together that we are entombing ourselves? Have we quit believing God's baptismal promise that our death is behind us, not ahead of us? Through God's Word and water, we have died with Christ. Drowned are the powers of sin, death, and the devil. We have been raised to newness of life in Christ.

Archbishop Gregory reminded us when we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation and to which the Methodists have now signed as witnesses that when we are baptized in Christ, we are clothed not only with the robes of Christ's righteousness, but with Christ's whole body, the Church.

I often call to mind St. Francis' statement, "In baptism we have died the only death that matters, leaving us free to risk every other death for the sake of life." So, do we need a mission statement for our full communion relationship? Probably not, but if we do, could there be a clearer mission statement than from our John 11 reading? "Take away the stone! Come out, unbind them, let them go!"

"Take away the stone!" Rather than being entombed in our own controversies and preoccupied with our own survival, let us go together—Methodists, Lutherans and ecumenical partners—to where others are being entombed. There, together in the strong name of Jesus, let us echo Christ's command, "Take away the stone!"

This is the good news we believe and we proclaim: through Christ's death and resurrection, God calls us to lives of faith and sets us free to confront and remove all those stones—those barriers—that insulate us from the stench of death and isolate us from those being entombed.

"Take away the stone!" Immigrants are driven to underground caves, living in fear. African American men are warehoused in prisons. Those living in poverty are hidden from our eyes.

"Take away the stone!" A massive wall separates Israelis and Palestinians. To Israelis, that wall symbolizes and gives security from violence. For Palestinians, it is a sign of occupation that separates and destroys lives.

"Take away the stone!" Women, men, and children, are sentenced to death from diseases so often associated with poverty and so often leading to stigmatization and discrimination. HIV/AIDS and malaria become their tombstones.

"Take away the stone!" The backs of semi-trucks, the cargo hulls of freighters, and cardboard boxes have become caves for those bought and sold in the lucrative enterprise of human trafficking.

"Take away the stone!" We become so trapped in our consumptive living that we have entombed diverse and countless life forms in a cave of extinction. Can you smell the stench? If we don't smell the stench of death and see the stones that entomb others, then maybe the church is in the wrong place and Jesus stands weeping.

The cave of death is no place for God's creation. A tomb of poverty, discrimination, isolation, and violence is no place for God's children. Being all wrapped up in the trappings of our busy-ness or the beauty of our sanctuaries or the intensity of our controversies is no place for Christ's church.

"Take away the stone! Lazarus, come out. Unbind him. Let him go." Jesus' words are not an invitation for our consideration. Jesus did not whisper into the tomb saying, "Lazarus, I encourage you to consider inviting me to come and live in your heart and if you do, I may consider raising you from the dead." Nor did Jesus say, "Lazarus, if you will give assent to these doctrinal truths, or if you will engage in these spiritual practices and political actions, then there will be a strong possibility of life for you."

No if or then, only Jesus weeping and speaking words of command and promise. Roll away the stone. Come out. Unbind him. Let him go.

This is Jesus' declarative announcement of your destiny and mine. This Jesus who is the resurrection and the life promises, "I will call you to abundant life now because I love you with a steadfast love and God's constant mercy." This is God's baptismal promise spoken to you.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus unbinds all who live entombed in guilt, fear, and shame. Let them go to live as forgiven sinners: a new creation in Christ. Lord, unbind our churches from the tomb of a single dominant culture. Redeem us from the shackles of racism and white power and privilege. Let us go to live and serve as a richly diverse, multilingual, multicultural, multigenerational Pentecost people.

When first the United Methodist Church and then, one year later, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted overwhelmingly (over 90 percent majorities) to approve this relationship of full communion, it was the culmination of years of theological conversation that led to the report, "Confessing Our Faith Together." That document affirms there are no church-dividing differences that preclude full communion. Wow! This action in a culture of polarization when the only stories of denominations that apparently are worthy of telling are those of alienation and possible separation.

Now we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, have engaged in this act of reconciliation, recognizing in one another the one holy, catholic, and apostolic faith as it is expressed in the scriptures, confessed in the church's historic creeds, attested to in the Lutheran Confessions and the Doctrinal Standards of the United Methodist Church. Perhaps we fail to appreciate what a powerful testimony this act can be, for we live in a religious climate in which people of faith seem prone to point out faults and deficiencies. Some speak of the heresies in their own or another church's teachings and actions.

Yet we have spoken clearly and publicly of what we recognize in one another: the authenticity of each other's Baptism and Eucharist, extending sacramental hospitality to one another's members. We recognize the validity of our respective ministries and the full interchangeability and reciprocity of all ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament.

For all of this and for all who have brought us here, we give thanks to God this day. But is that it? Then back to dwelling in our respective denominational caves? No, because now together we hear and heed Jesus' command: Roll the stone away. Come out. Unbind them. Let them go.

Now let reception begin. I don't mean punch, peanuts, coffee, and cake following a service. Reception is the evangelical imagination that marks our deeper growth into our relationship of full communion. Let there be evangelical imagination as we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed, for Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life.

Let reception be marked by our joyful anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning, crying, and pain will be no more. God will dwell with God's people. The lamb on the throne will make all things new.

How do we joyfully, faithfully, and together anticipate God's promised future? By our courageous and humble participation in God's mission today.

Lutheran pastor Joe Bash used to say that the church is called to engage in eschatological calisthenics. By that he meant exercising today by being signs of God's promised future. How? By wiping away the tears of those who mourn the loss of life and the absence of hope; by offering the water of life to those parched souls thirsting for a word of forgiveness; by easing the pain of those crying for justice and an end to violence; by announcing God in Christ is present with God's people, making all things new. Oh, yes, church, full communion is because caves of denominational separation are no place for Christ's church. So we pray: Come, Holy Spirit. Take away the stone. Call us out. Unbind us. Let us go together in Jesus' name. Amen.