

Evangelism is Messy

I am enthralled by the fields this time of year. The lines are so straight and the plants are all there, growing out of the rich soil. Everything is in its place, the fields are clean, lessons on rotation and terracing are in evidence, it is all as it should be.

In a recent presentation, ELCA Bishop David Brauer-Rieke of the Oregon Synod likened such fields to the way we often see the church: organization; each crop in its place; everything growing at the same rate; neat, straight rows; not a weed to be found; systems in place for tilling, planting, and harvesting.

Brauer-Rieke suggested another image close to home for him - the church as an Oregon rainforest. There are no neat furrows there. There are plants and trees of every species, often growing one on top of the other. There are no "weeds" because everything is valued as a gift from God. The wind blows, the rain falls, they determine the outcome more than human hands.

When I was part of the Bethel Bible study, we used the terms "Greek" and "Hebrew" in describing different cultures. We are the modern day "Greeks" who need to be in control, who need to analyze and put everything in its place. And we read the Bible in the same way. The problem is that the Bible writers were "Hebrew," they gloried in the work of God, simply telling the story, appreciating the world rather than trying to control it.

I love orderliness and organization, but in the season of Pentecost, I am challenged to make room for the wind, the Spirit, as well. I think about the parable of the sower, the farmer casting the seed to the wind. It was not very efficient. Remember all the wasted seed that fell on rocks and in the thorns. There were no straight lines in such fields. And what of that advice to leave the weeds to The Scriptures remind us that God will take care of such cleaning. Still there was a bountiful harvest. We and our faith are proof of that.

I have discovered in recent months that evangelism can be messy. The Spirit blows in different directions. The seeds get mixed together. You can forget the straight furrows. There are surprises at every corner. But the harvest still comes. What excitement. Thanks be to God!

Shalom,



Harold Usgaard
Bishop



Turning Smoke Into a Blaze

By Larry Iverson
Synod Minister



"Where there is smoke,
there is fire!"

I remember hearing that saying years ago from my parents. It is funny how those old sayings can give insight into a lot of events or circumstances. It could mean there is going to be trouble if whatever is causing the smoke is not addressed soon because it might break out in a large fire. It can also mean that you should not give up on something because it isn't fully ablaze yet. The smoke indicates there is still something smoldering inside that could create a full blazed response in the future.

I like the last meaning best, and I think it has an analogy to our faith. I see it in congregations where the fire seems to have faded, but an event or the Holy Spirit takes hold and touches people and congregations to get new energy. Sometimes it occurs at anniversaries when lots of energy is engaged in preparing for the celebration. Sometimes, it is a new building project or a change in staff. The smoke begins to break out in fire as people once again understand why they came into being - because God called them to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others.

I think another source of turning smoke into fire is the awakening of our spirit of generosity and mission support. Some of the people that I have witnessed catching on fire are those who have been open to give of themselves financially and through their time and abilities. By opening yourself up to the Spirit in your giving, you could allow the Holy Spirit to work in you and fire up your faith.

Paul stated this in Romans 12: "Therefore I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship."

Consider opening yourself to greater generosity in giving and see what the Holy Spirit can fan into flames in your life and your church.

In Christ's love,

Larry Iverson