

Bishop Smith's reflections—June 21, 2016



While hiking on the Boone Fork Trail at Julian Price Park this month as a prelude to preaching in Lenoir, Wendy and I met two young women walking toward us. One of them stopped us and the ensuing conversation was a scene that has played out many times for me and, I would guess, for you.

She asked me, "Are you saved?" "Yes," I assured her. "Oh?" she continued, "So you're born again? When were you born again?" Remembering my favorite Martin Marty quote in just such encounters, I answered politely, "Well, saved when I was baptized, and born again many times, actually each new day!" She was having none of it. "But when were you baptized? How were you baptized?" I told her, "As an infant in the Lutheran Church." "Oh!...she exclaimed with a look of genuine horror in her eyes. "Then you're NOT saved!

You're NOT born again!"

At this point, I felt compelled to share my "credentials" with her and told her I'm a Lutheran pastor and that I appreciated her zeal for the faith but that there are many different flavors of Christians, and I had no doubt that she is God's precious child just like I am. "But you're NOT," she insisted. She handed me a tract—the classic "Heaven or Hell...which will you choose?"—and she said, "You have to decide." By now Wendy had walked away, either irritated by this brand of evangelical message or anticipating some impending snarkiness on my part that would embarrass her.

"Look," I said, "in John 15:16 Jesus clearly says, 'You did not choose me; I chose you.' And in the encounter with Nicodemus and the whole 'born again' thing, the Greek word is *anōthen*, which more literally means, 'from above.' You must be born from above. You can't crawl back in the womb and physically be born again. And if it's from above, then it's not from me, it's from God. And that's grace." I was so proud of having set her straight on her admirable faith journey. Undaunted, she declared, "I'm not interested in Greek. I'm quoting from the King James."

It was all I could do not to say, "Well, you've got me there. Everybody knows Jesus spoke perfect King James English and had blond hair and blue eyes." But I didn't. I just said, "I have to go. God bless you." As I hurried off down the trail to catch Wendy, the young woman called after me, "I'll pray for you!" "Likewise!" I yelled. "Thanks!"

Now, I'm all for witnessing to our faith. It's the core of the Church's mission. I think she had the Gospel narrative's implications all wrong. She was sure I did. I'm learning to have convictions without judging others—especially their eternal souls. Something about wheat and weeds growing together and leaving that judgment to God at the final harvest. I worry about fundamentalism that sets up, "In order for me to be right, you therefore must be wrong. In order for me to be saved you must be damned. It's my/our way or the highway." The logical and tragic conclusion of any fundamentalism (which we enjoy pinning entirely on radical Islamic terrorists but of which any religion can be guilty) is "In order for me/us to live, you must die."

Lutherans have been lots of things through the years and have fractured and struggled through a multitude of issues. One thing we've historically been pretty good at is not pointing fingers, not judging, not assuming that we have a monopoly on the faith and salvation market. At the end of his life, Luther himself reportedly said, "We are beggars. It is true." We have convictions about which we bear witness and issue invitations. But we understand that the tiny yet essential portion of the fulness of God which God has revealed to us in Christ leaves plenty of room for the mystery of God that is yet to be revealed. I pray that we can be a Church full of conviction and witness but not accusation and judgment. And may God truly bless the young woman on the trail.

In Christ,

Bishop Timothy Smith



North Carolina Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.