

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 5/24/2024

The Role of the Pastor

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

My recent and unexpected absence from worship last Sunday provides an opportunity to think about the pastor and her/his role in the congregation. Several denominations insist that only pastors can perform specific tasks. For example, the Roman Catholic Church believes that only a priest may preside at communion so the ritual is performed correctly and that the specific moment when the bread and the wine become the body and blood is clear. (Lutherans believe that the body and blood are present in the bread and wine for all who receive it in faith.) When Martin Luther presided at communion for the first time as a young monk, he faltered in raising the chalice causing some controversy. I guess GOD might have been confused about when to transform the elements.

It is important to recognize that in the Lutheran Church, we always try to keep the emphasis on what GOD does and not what we do. It is not the pastor/priest who changes the communal elements by raising the chalice in a certain way at a particular moment. It is GOD who provides CHRIST's body and blood in the elements, not through any action of the one presiding, but by the faith of the one receiving. Whoever presides is simply the instrument through which the proclamation of forgiveness is made, and the presentation of the sacrament is done rightly.

Thus, it is that we can have lay people as well as clergy taking communion to those who are homebound or infirmed. We also know of individuals like nurses in hospitals and others who have baptized infants in emergency circumstances. Martin Luther taught that we are the "priesthood of all believers," and are all called to share the blessings of CHRIST with others, not haphazardly, but in an orderly fashion.

So, what then, is the role of the pastor? First, let me note that the term pastor appears in the Bible only in Ephesians 4:11-13 where it says, "So CHRIST HIMSELF gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip HIS people for works of service, so that the body of CHRIST may be built up until we all reach unity in faith and the knowledge of the SON of GOD and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of CHRIST." The work of these people in the church is to equip GOD's people and help them to develop as mature Christians. Toward that end, congregations call pastors to oversee the administration of the sacraments, again for the building up of the body of CHRIST. It is the pastor's responsibility to be sure that the various pastoral acts of the church are done properly. That doesn't mean that the pastor has to be the one who does them; only that the pastor selects individuals who can perform them correctly.

Even with that statement, however, there is a suggestion that it is the individual who is performing the act that is central. Again, this is incorrect because it is GOD who performs the blessing upon us. The one presiding carries out the action, but it is GOD who gives the benefit. And even if it is done "incorrectly" with misspoken words or flawed movements, GOD will overcome those human errors to ensure that the blessing is given.

Pastors usually preside at the sacraments and over other activities in the church, not because they have some special power. It is because they have training that helps them to create unity in how things are done. But GOD is the ONE granting the blessings and GOD, even working through flawed individuals, will do this faithfully for the building up of the body of CHRIST.

In CHRIST's love,
Pastor Jeffrey