

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2010

Reverend Julio Cruz, Pastor
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, US

Scriptures: Acts 11:1–18, Psalm 148, Revelation 21:1–6, John 13:31–35

The church that we have known is dead

“The church that we have known is dead.” I have not been able to get those words out of my head since last week when I heard them from the lips of Bishop Kevin Kanouse during his first address to the Synod Assembly. And he was not about to tone down. He used words such as body, and corpse, and deceased to refer to the church. He wanted to make sure that we understood his point which he clearly spelled out in his online blog: “Protestant Christianity is clearly on the run in the United States. Mainline is not mainstream any more. People are deserting congregations in droves. The faithful of generations past are dying out and the future for the church of my grandparents, my parents, and even of my hopes and dreams when I went into ministry is clearly no longer a reality. I am prepared to proclaim that the church as we have known it for so long is officially dead.”

That’s pretty grim, don’t you think? And it was even more so for me as I experienced my first assembly as part of the Lutheran Church in Northern Texas. Maybe I should have taken my things and gone somewhere else. Maybe I should have tried my luck in a more welcoming environment. I mean, who wants to hear their spiritual leader proclaiming the death of the church? That’s not what I signed up for. I remember when I came out of seminary. I had dreams, and plans, and ideas. I was so sure that I could make a difference. I wanted to help people relive, and reengage, and reenergize their discipleship. My idea of ministry is to rally up, not to weigh down. Even in the times of uncertainty and difficulty, you preach hope and faith. What is all this nonsense about the church being dead? I’m telling you, for a few minutes I was very disheartened.

But then Bishop Kevin went on. The fact of the matter is that that’s not the church or the message he signed up for either. He was not trying to deflate our spirits or shake down our faith. *Au contraire*, he was trying to get us to open our eyes. Was he overdramatic? Maybe. Was he truthful? Certainly! It is indeed a fact that the way in which we experience the church today is very different to the way we have known it before. That’s not necessarily bad; it’s just different. What we need to realize is that different circumstances require different ways of doing things. That’s true socially, economically, politically, and certainly it is also true for the way we do ministry.

You think that’s surprising; I’ll tell you what’s even more surprising. That we, as people of God, have been there before; we just fail to relate to those stories. How do you think the disciples felt after Jesus was crucified? Actually you don’t have to wonder that; it’s here in the gospels. They were afraid, they were scared, they tried to hide themselves from everybody else. They actually proclaimed that the mission that Jesus had just started was dead. But just as Jesus died so that he could resurrect, so his ministry needed to be done in a different way. As we always say, there is no resurrection without the cross. We

have to see the story as a whole. We can't understand the joy of the empty tomb if we have not experienced the crucifixion first.

Take for example today's gospel reading. Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." It all sounds so very sweet, right? It all sounds, well, so very loving. Like an idyllic state of living. Nirvana. Perfection. If we just do that, everything will be alright. And that may very well be correct, but we fail to understand the context where those words are found. They are part of Jesus farewell discourse, knowing very well where he is heading. Yes, the gospel is very much about love. God's love for us shown in Jesus, but also love that finds expression in the dying Jesus on the cross. The command to love does not end when he died. No; the command to love finds a new and different way to be understood and practiced precisely because he died. God's love was wasn't dead. It was being expressed in a new and powerful way. So powerful that its effect endures even to this day.

Ironically, love one another then implies that we must be willing to let go of the things we love. Love one another means that we must be willing to suffer in the desire of being Jesus disciples. Love one another means that we must be willing to go down the path that Jesus took. Love one another means that we must be willing to envision a different future. Not a bad or pessimistic future, just a different one. Death is transformative. It transforms our life from what we know now to something that we may not totally understand but that we believe is good and eternal. To be able to get that we have to shed our present understanding and our present reality and embrace God's promise of something better. The same happens with our church. It may be dead in the sense that it doesn't look like the church we use to know, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't have a promise of more and better things to come. We just have to be able to want to do it.

How are we going to do that? We may have a clue in today's first reading from the book of Acts. Peter was being criticized—ironically as Jesus also was—because he was mixing with the wrong crowd. It says that "the apostles and some believers heard that even the gentiles had accepted the word of God." But some of the circumcised believers didn't think that it was a good idea to get together and eat with them. Isn't that what they had told Jesus about mixing in with sinners and eating with tax collectors? It does seem like we keep repeating our patterns, don't we? But God makes it clear through the vision that Peter had that all are welcome to participate in the Kingdom of God. "Don't call profane, what God has made clean" said the voice of God in Peter's vision. In other words, those to whom God has given the repentance that leads to life, are also part of the people of God.

I'm sure that Peter and the rest of the disciples must have thought that was a very different "church" to the one they had started to know when Jesus was with them. The church that they had known was also dead and a new church where "even" the gentiles were part of was arising. And the same message is for us on this day. I don't think Bishop Kanouse was preaching a fatalistic message about the church. If anything, he was preaching about a church that is being transformed, that is being changed, that is being reinvented. Who or what are our gentiles today? What do we have to do anew to continue being relevant to the world. The biblical message is still the same. The Gospel is still the same. The love of God remains unchanged, but how should we do make that message be heard in the world

that we live today. How can we be a new church in the very different world in which we live?

These are the questions that our Bishop presented us in the assembly. In many ways, these are the same questions that our congregation is trying to answer too. I don't pretend to have all the answers to those, but I certainly have the disposition to go along with you in answering them. The truth is that, you and I, and each of one of us struggles continually to understand and find God in our ever changing circumstances. If the church as we have known it is dead, it doesn't mean that Church of God is dead. It just means that God will raise it to a new life. Just like we all die when we go through the waters of Baptism, so the church has to be raised to a new life. God will do it; no doubt about that. The question is, are we going to be those through whom God will bring up that new life. Let's continue traveling together, brothers and sisters, and let us put ourselves into the hands of God so that he can do the mission he wants to do through us. Amen.