

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ in the Northwestern Ohio Synod,

How would you answer the question, “When all is said and done, what do you hope and pray will have been accomplished through your life?” How would you answer the question, “When the day is done, what do you hope and pray God will accomplish through the congregation of which you are a part?” Such questions are clarifying. They push us to ask about what finally is of greatest importance.

Some months ago someone asked me, “Bishop, what do you want for our life together in this synod?” That was a clarifying moment for me. I found myself saying, “When people look at us individually, or when they look at our congregations, or when they look at the agencies and ministries that relate to the Northwestern Ohio Synod, or when they look at us as a synod, I hope and pray that they will see something of what God is doing in Christ Jesus through us, among us, and within us.” That’s it!

According to St. Mark, Jesus begins his ministry with these words: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’” Mark 1:14-15 The gospels then unfold the story of how the kingdom (the reign) of God draws near in the person of Jesus, in his words and deeds, in his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. In response to that story, God’s desire is that we do an “about face” (that is, after all, the deepest meaning of repentance) and trust ourselves to the One who is the author of that story. When by the power of the Holy Spirit we do that, those around us will see something of the reign of God unfolding. Similarly, when we see that in others, we see something of what God is up to in Christ Jesus.

Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we who belong to the congregations, ministries and agencies of this synod will be signs of and participants in God’s in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus. Our May Synod Assembly adopted that Vision Statement as a way of pointing us to that which has ultimate importance for us individually, and as congregations, ministries and agencies of this synod. The big question is not “Are we liked” or “what do people think of us” or “will we survive” or “do we have enough money.” The big questions are; Do people see Christ when they look at us? Are we able to see something of the reign of God in Christ as we look at each other and as our eyes are open to the world around us?

Lutheran Christians believe that we see God’s in-breaking reign most clearly when we gather for worship, as we acknowledge the promise given to us in our baptism when we were “marked with the cross of Christ forever, when we confess our sins and hear the promise of forgiveness, as we wrap ourselves in the Word of God in Christ Jesus, when we participate in the prayer of the church, when we receive and give “the peace of Christ”, and when we are nourished with Christ’s body and blood.

Then our eyes are open to other people and places where we see something of God’s in-breaking reign. Several days ago, I visited St. Lucas in Toledo. After a conversation with the pastor, Martin Billmeier, that concluded with prayer, I witnessed a room of men gathered for an AA meeting. In another room, items were being gathered and marked for their “Free Store”. In still another space the kitchen was busy in preparation for a daily meal which serves 65-80. In this community of poverty and the manifold stresses of life, there were ample signs of the *abundance, generosity, and love* that are characteristic of the life of Christ.

A little later in the day, I participated in the dedication of the Labuhn Center at the Lutheran Homes Society campus in Oregon. The center was named after Jerry Labuhn and his wife, Ilene, whose lives have been marked by the ability to see Christ in those most vulnerable. And, in their care, others have seen Christ. Again I saw something of those who are “signs of and participants in God-s in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus.”

How would you answer the question, “When all is said and done, what do you hope and pray will be said about your life, that of your congregation, and that of this synod?” My fervent hope and prayer is that our lives, our congregations, and this synod will be signs of and participants in God’s in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus. That finally is a matter of ultimate importance. Really, in the end, nothing else matters.

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