



Office of the Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

2009 Churchwide Assembly Service of Holy Communion

Sunday, Aug. 23, 2009

Texts: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Sermon by the Rev. Allan C. Bjornberg, bishop, ELCA Rocky Mountain Synod; chair, ELCA Conf. of Bishops

There is good news for you today. Your labor in the Lord as the Body of Christ is over and you've come to this Sabbath, and now your labor is committed to the Holy Spirit. There is good news today for those of you who are preachers and have labored in the sixth chapter of John for 35 weeks.

But the best news is that you have been baptized into the future of God's life in Jesus in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I confess to you that for most of my life I have struggled with punctuation. I have the credentials of an English major, but not the certainty. Perhaps that's why I became a theologian.

Punctuation is a definitive, certain, clarifying declaration, and theologians, despite their own propensity for proclamation, love questions—the continuing questions. And there are many.

But for us as living theologians, the question at the heart of it always seems to be: Is it grace, period, or is it grace, comma? My head knows, but my heart hesitates.

Before the reformation days it was, without question, grace, comma.

"Yours is the grace and mercy of God, comma, if you, or, comma, when you, or, comma, after you, or, comma, unless you, or, comma, until you ..."

Immersed in Scripture, deeply scarred and shaped by their own pilgrimage, Luther and the reformers brought a new editing style. "Christ alone," they said. Period. "Grace alone," they said. Period. "Word alone." Period. "Faith alone," they said.

That's four alones. But as Luther himself said about the Holy Trinity, "Mathematics does not apply here."

Grace. Period.

But commas die hard. They keep coming back. Among others, Puritans arose in 17th century in England, and brought a boatload of commas to New England, liberally seeding American religious topsoil—not "God loves you period," but rather, God loves you, comma, if ..."

Let's be honest about the broad American cultural understanding surrounding us, and let's admit that many believers, and non-believers as well, are infected by commas.

And let's admit that we humble and shy Lutherans have our pockets full of them as well. One of my colleagues said, "I have to admit I preach grace, but I live works-righteousness."

And we have been pushing commas around, back and forth, up and down, for the last week, so we know what that's about.

The only cure, it seems to me, for life-threatening, faith-threatening commas is Baptism. Immersed in Christ, we become part of—part of—the Body of Christ. As if by osmosis, our life and the life of Christ

become one. This is the eucharistic mystery Jesus repeatedly proclaims in the sixth chapter of John. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them," Jesus said.

And the disciples said, "Huh? Question mark."

Jesus said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." I give you myself, and you partake of me. I am living bread." "I give you myself, and you partake of me, and you become bread."

Thirty years ago, I learned to make bread from a real live 70-year-old Norwegian bachelor. He laid out all the ingredients and carefully guided me through the mixing and the kneading, waiting—drinking coffee—while the dough rose, and kneading again. And when I was up to my elbows in flour, his face suddenly turned bright red. He said, "The person who taught me to make bread said, 'Cooking is like being in love. It's better to do it than to talk about it.'"

The same is true of community, especially for the Body of Christ.

Church is less an institution and more an event. It occurs where faith and God's Word collide. In the crucible of that holy fusion, the Body of Christ is formed. In that fusion something happens to our expectations and our agendas, and our punctuation. When we confess our belief in the living God, we are affirming that God enters our contemporary experience.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is as good as any institutional expression of the church, the assembly of God's people. But our witness emerges from our baptismal identity as the Body of Christ, from the Holy Spirit.

"Nobody can come to me unless drawn by the Father, and I will raise that person up on the last day," Jesus said. We can tinker with the institution. God creates the Church. Period. We can wander away in run-on sentences of our own making, and God knows we can wander. But only Christ has the words of eternal life. Only Christ.

Can we live this Gospel, which throws out self-justification in order to make room for the stranger? Can we make hospitality our utmost priority? Welcoming, waiting on, washing and wooing the stranger in the fashion of the Good Samaritan, the loving father of the prodigal son, of Jesus himself?

Can we, who have no other credential except the honor of being a guest at the table, humbly make room for other guests of the same gracious host?

We can, if the punctuation's right.

Dear church, I know that some of you may be grieving, or feeling disoriented; some of you may be rejoicing or elated. Some may be angry or apprehensive. Some may be frightened.

Pray tell me, how that makes you, how that makes us together, different from any other discipling community since the Resurrection fusion disoriented that first band of believers.

But, whatever you feel, do not go away. We are together the Body of Christ, and that is not of our own choosing, nor of our own making. None of us has Christ; Christ has us—has us all. As Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

We have come to know again this week that a baptized reforming church is not just a change agent, but a changed agent. We have come to know again this week that a reforming church is always itself being reformed and made new.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

John witnesses in a profound way to this osmotic fusion in the 20th chapter. It's Jesus' second visit to the disciples in the upper room, you'll remember, behind the locked door. This time the reluctant, crushed Thomas is there. "My heart is broken," Thomas said. "My dreams are dashed. I'm not going there again. Unless I see it and touch it, I will not believe." And Jesus comes and says, "Peace. Touch me, Thomas," he says. "Touch me and believe." And touching the wounds of Christ, Thomas found faith. In this fusion—in this fusion—touching the wounded body of Christ—the faith of Thomas was forged.

There is no other Christ, sisters and brothers, but the wounded, crucified and risen Christ. And there is no other Body of Christ but the wounded Body of Christ. And you have touched it.

If we return to our communities of faith and speak only of our own wounded-ness, only of our own lament, or only of our own joy over the events of this week, and do not tell the amazing story of how this Body of Christ touches the wounds of the hungry, those afflicted with malaria or HIV/AIDS, the refugee, the immigrant, the soldier, the young person, the orphan, the abandoned, then our witness is false.

We will in Christ bear the burden and the joy of our decisions together as the Body of Christ. We will live into this future together as the Body of Christ.

It is our biblical, doctrinal, creedal, experiential affirmation that the Holy Spirit has been brooding over this assembly. To say otherwise is not possible for Lutherans. If the Spirit's constructions are not of my design or yours, we are still in Christ, still baptized. I am still with you and you with me and every one of these others as the Body of Christ.

Can we live such a radical future in the days to come?

We can, if the punctuation is right.

Of course, there will be many question marks. We know that. That's Lutheran too, you know? What does this mean?

We'll begin by asking, "What does this mean for you?" And then listening carefully, heart-fully, to the answers. And then we'll ask what does this mean for the Body of Christ together?

There will be question marks, but that's not what I mean by the right punctuation. I mean grace. Period.

And not grace, period, for me and grace, comma, for you, but Grace. Period. For me. Period. For you. Period. For God's beloved world. Grace. Living in Christ, and Christ living in us, making us again and again his Body. Punctuated by our living and our dying, and our living again. The Word, our Christ, our future, is living—breathing life into us, transforming us into his Body for the sake of the world. The Word is a living word. And the punctuation is also alive.

You, beloved child of God—you, dear Church—you, Body of Christ, are the point. The point of it all. The Word is alive, and you are alive in the Word, baptized into the unending hymn of the angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, and all the company of heaven.

Sing it loud, Body of Christ, sing it sweet, wounded, Body of Christ, sing your future. Sing your future now.

Alleluia.