



Last weekend was our annual Northeastern Ohio Synod Assembly. Saturday was the usual edge-of-your-seat thriller material looking over the budget for the upcoming fiscal year and the treasurer's report, among other business updates and resolutions. However, the day before was more of a continuing education opportunity for clergy and lay folk alike, and one of those sessions was entitled, "Renewing the Church." And when hearing the words from Second Corinthians this morning, "we have spoken frankly to you," that is exactly what the speaker was doing that day.

He didn't start off saying anything overly groundbreaking: the church is not what it used to be back in the hey-day of the 1950s, when more and more people filled the pews on Sunday mornings. It has now reached the point where we believe less than 10% of Americans are now active public worship participants: less than 1 out of every 10 in this country. But, the speaker did his best to put a positive spin on it: that, quite frankly, we are weird...for still doing this, for being part of such a slim minority. However, he believed, quite frankly, we shouldn't shy away from it. We should proudly claim it. We should bask in being weird.

So, I can't help but think back to when I was in seminary, and we were asked to check out different churches in the area for worship, to get a broader experience how different congregations conducted themselves on a Sunday morning. So, one weekend, I went to this old Episcopal church in downtown Columbus, to a building that has towered there ever since 1866. It wasn't all that weird to be there, necessarily. The Lutherans and Episcopalians have quite a bit in common that we may not realize, after all. Except, it got weird right after the sermon. There was a baptism that day, and the priest not only invited the parents and the infant and godparents to come, but he asked absolutely everyone there to gather around the font that was smack dab in the middle of the sanctuary.

Now, as the years have gone by, I have seen other pastors do the same thing, but at the time, it just felt weird. Growing up I was used to sitting in the pew through the entire worship. Maybe standing for a few hymns and prayers. Maybe turning around to share some peace, but not leaving my spot at all to do so. Maybe I would walk up-front for Communion once a month. Otherwise, including for any baptism, we stayed right where we were the entire time. That was comfortable. That just felt right. Doing anything else would be a mental distraction, taking our focus away from the Almighty, All-Powerful God.

So, come that Sunday morning at an old Episcopal church in downtown Columbus, I assumed we Episcopalians and Lutherans were on the same page, especially the Episcopalians in a building that has stood there since the Civil War. Surely, they would avoid any weirdness whatsoever. Evidently not. The priest put me in a weird spot, being so close with people I never met, as if we were supposed to be one family in Christ, no matter what. I didn't know the one getting baptized or the family, but I was invited into the same circle, filled with other people and their own weirdness, as if we could care for strangers with the same love of Christ. It felt weird, but you know what, that's the only thing I remember about that historic building, about that entire worship, was when it felt weird, to be part of one family in Christ, to be part of the same circle of God's love that evidently has no church membership limits whatsoever.

I guess, as the Second Corinthians language goes: quite frankly, we are called to be weird in this world; that not only is God's heart wide open, as described in that letter; so, so wide open through Jesus Christ that God would become in the flesh for us and live with us and die with us and rise to new life for us. But, God doesn't want it to stop there. God wants us to be so weird to open our hearts wide open as well. Quite frankly, there is more weirdness to this whole church operation thing than we realize, even if it isn't the same as it was back in the 1850's or 1950's.

Come to think of it, how weird is it that God is willing to forgive us time and time again? How weird is it that when we celebrate Communion, we believe God invites everyone to partake of it, no matter their spiritual condition? How weird is it that with all the different denominations and ways we worship, that, in God's eyes, we are one family in Christ? How weird is it that God's love for us can never ever stop, no matter what we say or do or don't do? How weird is it that we keep coming back for more, as if we cannot get enough of the holy weirdness of this grace, when God's heart was made so wide open in Jesus Christ, that the whole world would be made new again. And so, quite frankly, we give thanks to God for the holy weirdness that continues to be brought to life not just in the church, but throughout this world that God still so loves. Thanks be to God, indeed! Amen.