



The last couple of weeks I have been part of an online continuing education event that included numerous pastors from different countries, as if we in the clergy still have some things we can learn about Scripture, the church, and the entire world, for that matter. We were expected to watch these YouTube lectures about our beloved Martin Luther's writings in advance, and then we would join these live sessions as the professors went through some of our questions. Nevertheless, the most enriching part of the entire experience is when they put us into these breakout rooms, where just a few of us pastors would talk rather openly about

how it isn't always so easy to apply what Luther wrote five hundred years ago to our congregations today: into a world where not everyone is immediately taken after birth to the local church building to be baptized, into a place where not everyone knows about the peace and love of Christ, to a people who may not respond so well to the fire and brimstone proclamation that lasted for far, far too long in the church.

And so, as we approach our national day of Thanksgiving, I am thankful for the worldwide body of Christ that insists on still trying to proclaim love and hope and mercy and grace and joy to a humanity that desperately yearns to hear it. We pastors still have much to learn on how best to pull that off, but truly I tell you, so, *so* many clergy throughout this world are trying with all their might. You will not hear much about them, so I want to tell you about one of those pastors I met these last couple weeks.

Pastor "Andrea" serves a Lutheran church in Alberta, Canada, one of the provinces on the western end of our neighboring nation, a place that has already dealt with feet of snow in recent weeks. Now, Pastor "Andrea" grew up in the fundamentalist tradition of the church, and so she was not baptized until she was a teenager, when she felt she had reached a point in her life where she could fully confess Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and Savior. Except, she still had this insistent curiosity about the church, including her family's past with it.

Soon enough, Pastor "Andrea" did her own genealogy research, and she found that she had ancestors who lived in Massachusetts in the late 1600s, after they had immigrated from Europe. The problem is her family resided in Salem, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, it was there that her great X 10 grandmother was one of the women killed for suspicion of witchcraft. Worse yet, it was her own family who turned her in to the authorities of the church. After finding this out in her younger years, Pastor "Andrea" didn't necessarily lose hope in God, but she most certainly did with the church, not understanding why for any reason would the body of Christ do such horrible harm and instill the most intimidating fear over the humanity that God was meant to adore. So, Pastor "Andrea" left the church entirely for years, trying to find her own insistent way of bringing God's love to life to those who were often overlooked by the wider community of faith.

Over time, she worked for non-profit groups helping victims of human trafficking, a horrible reality that we do not like to think or talk about in general, let alone in sanctuaries, but unfortunately, it still happens far, *far* too much today. At various times, we pray for that most awful part of our humanity: that God will somehow take care of it; but thankfully there are so many who not only pray, but insist to be a glimpse of the answer to such prayers of sheer desperation. Pastor “Andrea” could not help herself but to be there for the women who were put through an absolute nightmare.

Eventually, Pastor “Andrea” returned to the church, and we are all better for it. Yes, she knows full well that there will still be certain parts of the body of Christ that unleash fire and brimstone and guilt and intimidation, but she insists on doing her part in our joint ministry to, instead, show unwavering compassion and boundless love. To be but a precious glimpse of God’s mind-boggling grace to people who so desperately yearn for it in their own life, because far too many are told that they do not deserve such a holy response from God.

So, as we approach our national day of Thanksgiving, I am not only thankful for my colleagues I was privileged to meet these past couple weeks. I’m thankful for the volunteers who work at shelters, soup kitchens, who will do so even this Thursday without even thinking about it. Because prayers of filling the hungry and caring for the overlooked in our world are being lifted up to God just as much this week as ever before, and they insist on being a part of God’s response. And yes, I’m still thankful for the people who never stop praying no matter how bleak the circumstances may be on this earth.

In the end, I’m thankful for the entire body of Christ who will insist on finding their own way, no matter how small it may seem, to bring God’s love to life. I’m thankful for the God who knows full well that we will struggle with the church, with our humanity, and even with Jesus Christ himself; that, in spite of all those fears and worries, God will adore us just the same. And that same God will insist that there’s going to be more than enough Holy Spirit within us to do our part in bringing the holy boundless love to life. I’m thankful that the Gospel is just as true now as ever before: nothing will ever happen in our life that will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our still-Risen Lord. For that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!