



This may not be the smartest idea for a pastor to admit out-loud, but there are not too many sermons that I actually remember. Granted, I really didn't start paying attention to anything said by the one standing up front in the white robe until later in high school, but even through college and seminary, only a few remain etched in my memory. One was during my year of seminary internship down in Dallas,

Texas. There was a night when pastors and leaders of the local ELCA Northern Texas – Northern Louisiana Synod gathered at the church I called home for several months, to discuss a vision for the hundreds of congregations spread out from Amarillo, Texas, to Shreveport, Louisiana, and beyond.

And the evening festivities started with a worship in the sanctuary. Thankfully, my supervisor took on the sermon in front of all of those clergy and synod staff. And the only reason why I remember this particular homily is because he did something I had never heard, and never since. Almost the entire time he stood up front, he asked these church leaders questions. Now, I had not quite completed my seminary training, but I was under the impression sermons were supposed to be filled with statements, declaring these bold irrefutable truths of the Gospel, to instill fearless conviction for listeners in the pews. Except, there is something to be said that our questions might just form our faith journey as much as any set of answers we receive from a pastor or a Sunday school teacher or from anyone else for that matter.

I will be the first to admit I thought my internship supervisor, this pastor who was supposed to teach and mentor me, was rather crazy that night. That he catastrophically failed in the spotlight in front of all these other pastors and the bishop, especially. However, questions force us to dig deeper than we may like. They implore us to dive into our hearts, into the depths of church identity, even into the holiness of God. That night, the people in the room would be asked to immerse themselves into the meaning of the church: what were they all doing there as leaders of faith communities? What was their passion?

That sermon came back to the forefront of my memory when reading through that line in the Gospel we heard this morning: “[the disciples] did not understand what [Jesus] was saying and were afraid to ask him.” How many times in the lifespan of a congregation did someone not ask a question, because they feared what might happen? How many times have children of God dared not ask a pastor, a Sunday school teacher, even a trusted relative, because they were afraid of the reaction that might ensue? How many times have people of any age even refused to ask God, because they did not want to upset the Almighty?

One of the realities at that time of 2010 for churches across northern Texas and Louisiana was what happened several months before: when the ELCA had to answer a question. Do we allow people in same-gendered monogamous relationships to serve as pastors in the church? For the hundreds who gathered as voting members in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the previous summer, the answer was, “Yes!” That obviously did not sit well with plenty of ELCA parishioners in Texas and Louisiana. Even the bishop of that particular synod did not vote in support of it, because he wasn't so sure the church was ready for the change just yet. Except, fast forward back several months later, one of the questions asked by my internship supervisor in Dallas was, “Where would the church be in five years?” He had absolutely no idea what was about to happen from that very bishop, who sat in front of him that evening.

It so happened that five years later was the ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit, Michigan. It is a transformational event that brings tens of thousands of young people from our congregations and plenty of other non-Lutherans into one city for worship, Bible study, service projects, and more. One afternoon was meant for the youth to break out into their respective geographical synods from which they traveled, and so this bishop stood in front of about 400 young people from Texas and Louisiana. During his sermon, all of a sudden, he went off-script, and told those precious children of God that he was gay.

He had not told a soul before then. Evidently, even bishops can be scared, but who knows how many teenagers in that very room were absolutely frightened to even ask the question if God could possibly love them for who they were, no matter how different they were from the rest? How many young people are still too scared to ask a pastor, a church-going Christian, even a cherished family member, for fear of the backlash that they worry they may never recover from for the rest of their life?

After that bishop came out that day, someone in the crowd immediately went up to him and said, “You saved some lives today.” The bishop broke down, overcome with emotions. As time passed:

*a mother and father pulled [the Bishop] aside before the beginning of a meeting and the mother, with tears in her eyes told [the Bishop] of her daughter, now in law school, who had come out to her...some months previously. [The mother] said: “I have prayed every night: ‘God change her. God change her.’ Then I read your...story about your experience and I picked up the phone and called her right away. I apologized to her and reassured her that I love her.” Their daughter had pretty much dropped out of church some years before...but the following Sunday they were in church, all three of them, as family.*

For far too many children of God, that line in the Gospel is still a reality. We are too scared to ask a question that keeps us up at night. We’re too scared to ask a sibling in Christ, someone in our own family, even God. We’re frightened of what might happen. And for far too many young people, they would rather not even try to dig into the possibility of grace, because the truth we proclaim makes them feel as if they are not good enough, not worthy of God’s love. “Where will the church be in five years,” we can still ask the question today. But we shouldn’t wait around for five years.

I want to be part of a wider church, not just with Lutherans, but all of us, that shapes an atmosphere of safety and comfort, to make all children of God feel that they need not be scared to ask the questions that impact their life. I want to be part of a church that not only welcomes the doubts and the wonderings, but be so bold to believe in the most amazing grace of Jesus Christ, that even for the person who asks if this God can possibly be real; that this God will not respond with fury and wrath, but instead, with unstoppable love for the one who has hit absolute rock bottom. As if the Gospel is still true: nothing, no question whatsoever, can separate us or anyone else from God’s relentless love in Christ Jesus our Lord, no matter what. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.

Source: [“After I Came Out, Guest Blog by Bp. Kevin Kanouse” – Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries \(elm.org\)](#)