

Zion Lutheran church, Stratford, Ontario November 8, 2015

*"Being Church Today"* Rev. Robert Hutchison

In the name of God: the Father who made us, the Son who redeemed us, and the Spirit who gives us life. Amen.

Last Tuesday Sister Jean and I attended a meeting for the Nith Area Ministry at St. Peter's, Milverton. About 40 were in attendance. Using power point Bishop Pryce of our Eastern Synod gave a presentation called, 'Being Church Today'. Someone had attended a retreat where he presented it and thought it would be good for us to hear also. The bishop showed the rapid growth of our church in the 50's and its rapid decline since we became an indigenous church in 1985. It won't be long until we will be half the size we were then. He highlighted some of the reasons, smaller families, people from non-Lutheran countries being the source of our immigration, people have other things to do, and, among other things, our resistance to change. The message I got was: we need to change, but we don't want to change. Now this sounds suspiciously strange to me. Is it true of us at Zion also?

In all of the world's history as we have come to know it, has it not been God's Good News that has been continuously bringing change into the depravity of humankind? When God created we read; "God saw that it was good." With Abraham God began a nation that was to bless the nations of the world. Then, out of that nation, God birthed Jesus Christ whose life, death and resurrection brought salvation to humankind and called the church into being to be God's witnesses in the world. When it seemed that the church had succumbed to its lust for power and control a man named Martin Luther rediscovered from the Scriptures; we are saved by grace, through faith, not of our own doing, it is the gift of God! That grace, brothers and sisters in the faith, as we witness from history, brings change. If the church is to change, doesn't it start with me and the changes that God's grace brings into my life to share with others? 'Being Church Today' starts with me, being the person God has created me to be, redeemed by grace in Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be God's witness. In order to be that witness I need to pray, read, worship, study, serve, give and tell. This list of 7 words were the call of our National Bishop, Susan Johnson, given several years ago, inviting our ELCIC into renewal. I don't remember this call being given here at Zion, but it's a good one.

Being a pastor, this call is always with me. Is it with you? I've never been a 'layperson' in the life of the church. Out of high school I went to prep school for ministry, then to seminary, and at 22 was ordained. I've never lost a job, never been out of work, only had one interview. What's it like being a 'layperson'? Do you find it as easy as I to follow the call of God in your life? The key for me has always been the Scriptures. This is where I hear God speak most clearly. God's call of grace and God's Word do bring us together to pray, read, worship, study, serve, give, and tell. What do we hear from God in the Scriptures we read today that invites change in our lives?

When I read them I felt like titling the sermon, 'In Praise of Widows'. They begin and end with widow stories.

The first reading from Mark begins with a warning from Jesus, ***"Beware of the scribes"***. As the era of the prophets ended about 500 years before Christ scribes came into being. They were men learned in the Torah, the five books of Moses, rabbis, today would be ordained theologians, like us pastors. The scribes saw themselves as having received the spirit of Moses in succession. There is an obvious lesson here for us to test the spirits of those who lead. Jesus revealed the scribes of his day as men who outwardly went about in long robes drawing attention to themselves, seeking respect in the marketplace, taking the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets. What these men did, said Jesus, was devour widow's houses. Women in Jesus day were identified through their husbands. When widowed they became non persons relying on the kindness of others to survive. Now, a scribe, finding out a widow had some money, would fraudulently claim it for God, leaving her without. How disgusting for those who claimed to be God's spokespeople. Jesus was God's changing presence, and change was needed.

After giving this warning Jesus sat by the temple close to one of the places where people brought their gifts of money. He observed that many people made gifts out of their abundance, but this poor widow, who had only two cents on which to live, gave all of it. Jesus pointed out that her gift was worth more than all the gifts of those who gave from their abundance because she gave, ***“her whole substance.”***

What was Jesus noting here? Was he chastising the gifts of the opulent? Was he raising the plight of the poor? Neither. Jesus was noting the devotion of a woman of faith. It is thought-provoking to me that with the demise of ‘Evangelical Lutheran Women’ in our ELCIC you women of Zion call yourselves, ‘Women of Faith’. You identify with God who saves you rather than a wear denominational tag. Faith changes us and, I believe, women are among the first to express it. The two stories of women in today’s readings; the poor widow endorsed by Christ, and Naomi’s daughter, Ruth, becoming a part of the lineage of Christ’s birth certainly affirm the Biblical truth that women and men are equal before God, and are essential to each other in God’s world.

A number of times I have heard this story of ‘The Widow’s Mite’, as it is often called, used for fundraising in the church. How despicable! This week we received a letter from our treasurer noting once again the large deficit we incur at mid-year at Zion.

It’s a repeated habit isn’t it. By year’s end it will even out, we assume. The pattern is, like the rest of our synod, we are not going to change, just get worse. This for me begs the question; who are we as people of faith in this place and what is God’s mission for us?

In her letter Marg draws our attention to a verse from Deuteronomy (16:17). Its occasion is a feast, the feast of booths, Israel’s harvest festival. Every male was required to attend for seven days of feasting and sacrifices. This feast *“points to the truth that Israel’s life rested upon redemption which in its ultimate meaning is the forgiveness of sin.”* (Tyndale III p.1512) Our problem is not money, it is a faith issue. Thanks to the mothers, daughters, widows, women of faith for flagging it. In the Festival City we are called to be Festival People, ***“according the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you”***, to quote Deuteronomy 16.

Life is eternal. It comes from God and belongs to God. It is only faith in God that gives life to our life. All the wealth we have accrued, all the achievements we have to our credit, all the good things we have done; all of these can only be counted as blessings. When I finish my day I will remember sin in my life, I will recognize the forces of evil eating away at humankind and God’s creation, I may die before I wake: but by the grace of God I live in God’s eternal kingdom. The reading from Hebrews speaks these words of grace so clearly. ***“But as it is, he (Christ) has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”*** Please note that the ‘judgment’ is not one of condemning us for sins retained but one of welcoming us into God’s eternal kingdom for sins forgiven by God’s grace .

‘Being Church Today’ necessitates change. The gospel creates it. It really comes down to who we are in Christ. The church is people, you and I, whose souls rejoice in the gift of God’s salvation and share these Good News with others any way we can. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen