

Sermon on 1. Thessalonians 1, 1-10, 10.06.2007

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Dear congregation,

My topic today is: What does it mean for us to belong to the Eastern Synod? And why is this important for us as Martin Luther Church?

To answer this question is particular difficult for me this morning, because I have someone listening who is one of the key players of our Eastern Synod; and I hope, Günter, I say it in a way, that you can agree.

Let me first take you through a little history lesson. Of course in the beginning there was no church. Jesus Christ formed a rather small community of men and women who followed him around. And also right after Pentecost there was no church, neither as building, nor as a church organization. But with growing numbers and rapid success in spreading the Gospel it became more and more apparent that there was the risk to lose some of the core teachings of Jesus due to different interpretations and understanding of his message, different influences of philosophies and attacks from the outside, and the attempt was made to bring some order into this situation. In the first century certain offices were introduced in the congregation. You can read in the letters like 1. Corinthian and the Letter to the Ephesians that different gifts require different offices. Paul was very clear that not everyone can do everything, but that people have to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is giving everyone a certain purpose in God's family. A little later alliance of different congregations in certain areas were formed to support each other and to fight back attacks from Jewish and Hellenistic communities, especially the Gnostics, and the persecution through the Roman Empire, which also, of course, decimated the Christian groups in Italy and Minor Asia significantly. Those conferences as we would call them today had in some cases a bishop to supervise them and preachers who were going from congregation to congregation preaching. In the years between 160 and 180 A.D. a monarchic, Episcopal office was installed in Rome, where the fight against Marcion and his followers made it important to have one voice for the rising Christian Church. Linus was the first Bishop of Rome, if we do not believe in the legend that Peter led the Christian Community as the first one. The ninth Pope, Pius, was the first influential and official recognized bishop with some power to rule not just the church, but also the city-state of Rome. One for the Christians favourable development was that in the outgoing second century the Roman Empire lost its significance. The Christian Church was against the Emperor Cult anyway, so they spearheaded the downfall of the Caesars. Another two hundred years later, Christianity was acknowledged as a state-religion, supported by the King and introduced as the religious and political power in Europe. The rest is indeed history. The Reformation brought about countless evangelistic movements and later on denominations, which spread across the globe as the Catholic Church did as well.

Nowadays, there are 70 Million Lutherans worldwide and 140 member churches of the Lutheran World Federation. The largest membership has Germany with close to 13 Million Lutherans. 175.000 members in the Lutheran Church in Canada, of which 78.000 Lutherans in 200 congregations make up the Eastern Synod.

I know, you think, what has this to do with us?

First and for all are we part of a movement which touched billions of people since Peter and his friends went out on the streets of Jerusalem to preach the crucified and risen Lord. Maybe it is just me, but this makes me feel different about church. We are not just an act of caprice of history. We carry a torch a little further which has been given to us, by people who had not the coziness of beautiful churches and the comfort that being a Christian, risk free and fun, at least for us.

When I go back to Germany I will be close again to the church in which I was baptized and my wife and I confirmed and married. Over thousand years of history, thick walls, crooked tiles on the floor, paintings which makes you aware: You are not the first one; God has sustained this church for such a long time. That makes me feel being part of something bigger than myself. God has a history with his people, that's what it tells me.

We come from somewhere and we belong somewhere. In our case we are part of a history and a church body which has defined many policies and has been influential in Canada in many ways. It is pretty simple but the more people you are, the more impact you have. And in case of the Eastern Synod: The better organized and flexible you are the more you can make yourself heard as a significant voice in the concert of so many different voices especially here in Canada.

And although I do not work for the Synod Office and am not on their payroll and do not have to say that, I must say, that this church body manages very well to be basically everywhere. Whenever there is a gathering of church leaders or you go some place where issues like poverty and hunger are discussed, you find Lutherans. Not that they are many, but they are simply everywhere.

Then there is good and personal leadership in our church. The Bishop and his staff know everyone by name, know the circumstances and are the friendliest people I have ever met in a church office. Long story short – they do a great job in showing the Lutheran colours all over the place. We are, although certainly a minority-church in Canada, visible.

Yes, and there is this other issue, which has caused so much discussion, headaches and controversy: Why does a Synod convention celebrate an Oktoberfest without the proper beer from Germany? – O, I guess this was not it, right, Günter? It was the other issue which made some churches jump over the barricade and declare their independence. I do not and want not recall the whole debate on same-sex blessing, but like to say something which in my estimate is more important than the subject as such, on which, we all know that, everybody might agree to disagree. The mere fact that debate is possible should fill us with a certain pride, because this is genuine Lutheran. The Lutheran church has always been and will always be a church of debate. We as a congregation can learn from that, namely that debate is necessary to learn from each other and to build on the heritage of democratic structures. We are not a church, in which one person can dictate where the church is going, and I think this is a clear advantage over church bodies in which it is heresy when you question the appropriateness of synodical decisions.

What does it mean for us to belong to the Eastern Synod? And why is this important for us as Martin Luther Church?

We need input from the outside. We need resources which we receive from the Synod in terms of constitutional guidelines, call process manuals, initiatives and decision-making processes in which we can be involved and foster the well-being of the church as a whole through our input as well.

It is not very often that you find leadership in a church where initiatives from congregations is wanted and fostered. The well-being of the Eastern Synod is directly related to the well-being of its congregations. Therefore are supposed to serve God where we are, in the language we speak, at the place where we are at.

I found a biblical text which somehow reflects the relationship between a congregation and the regional union of congregations, a synod.

Text:

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9 For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

This is an important statement, because it says, it works both ways. As a congregation we have the opportunity to let our light shine for others who then take this as an encouragement to do likewise, who knows. On the other hand do we learn from other congregations, we have the chance to learn how they and what they do, to imitate Christ, as it is said here.

Good news is what should spread in a Synod and what should encourage congregations to become good examples for others, like this Greek congregation in the city of Thessaloniki is.

What this means is that we can not only sit here and expect the Synod to deal with all kinds of issues and tell us how we can provide Christian leadership in our community. It should be the other way around that we want to be a good example, which strengthens the church body and increases the good reputation of the Lutheran Church in general.

This is different to what I often have encountered. In Germany it is customary to rant about what the people at the top of the church hierarchy have decided. What kind of understanding of what church should be is that? Isn't it more important that we whether we work in the Synod office or in a particular congregation do our utmost to serve God?

We are all called to let our light shine before the world – and we all know how much darkness there still is. We can only shine brightly when we work together and try to find solutions for the world's problems on the bases of our faith and in the trust that God helps us.

I would like to quote our Bishop:

The reformers, our forebears in the faith, provided so compelling a confession that it altered the theological and political landscape of that day and for generations beyond. But what of us? What is the nature of the confession we are making in our day, under our watch? For confess we will, like it or not, for better or for worse! The fact is we are continually making confession. Every day as we go about our daily lives. Every Sunday when we gather at church...will we confess, and to whom?...What will God think of our collective confession? Will it please? Will it disappoint? Will it go unnoticed? Or will we surprise both God and ourselves by being caught in the act of making a good, faithful and compelling confession to the faith that is in us? These are questions that we will answer collectively, for at the end of the day, no individual action, no individual speech or intervention will matter all that much. What will matter, however, is what we have done, what we have said, what we have confessed, together. Amen.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.