

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

- Ecclesiastes 3:1

August 24, 2010

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

On a recent morning walk I reflected upon familiar words from Ecclesiastes, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, NRSV). As I walked, I prayed and pondered about this time in the life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). It is my prayer that we use this time for discerning and engaging; for repenting and reconciling; for restraint but not timidity; and for rejoicing.

A Time for Discerning and Engaging

Throughout the ELCA I hear people asking, "Is my voice heard? Will my voice be respected as we seek together to discern God's purpose for us?" The answer is yes. Nevertheless, people of deep faith and a desire to be part of this church wonder: Do we mean it when we say we can preach, teach and hold divergent views on sexuality and be full participants in the ELCA's life and witness? Again, the answer is yes.

My confident "yes" is predicated upon our shared commitment to be engaged together in discernment. This discernment is hard work. It must be grounded in the witness of the Scriptures and the Confessions, and it needs the voices of all the baptized. It calls for the Holy Spirit's guidance and our prayerful, disciplined and respectful listening to one another.

Even more, the source for my confident "yes" is God's gracious "yes" to us, spoken through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The "yes" of Jesus empowers us to be passionately engaged. It frees us to ask questions, have difficult conversations and uncover differences and tensions. It calls each of us to be everyday evangelists, discerning together what the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ means for the world and for our common life.

Let our shared commitment be that our discerning together always will serve our proclamation of Jesus Christ in word and deed and our engagement in God's mission for the life of the world.

A Time for Repenting and Reconciling

The most powerful moment in the recent assembly of The Lutheran World Federation occurred when Lutherans asked for forgiveness from God and from Mennonites for the violence done to Anabaptist Christians in Reformation times and through the continuing legacies in Lutheran teachings. This public act of repentance, with many delegates on their knees, was a powerful witness to the healing of wounds in Christ's body, the church.

With tears in our eyes, we heard promises of God's mercy in Christ and words of forgiveness from Mennonite sisters and brothers as we received and shared God's gift of forgiveness and healing.

This experience of reconciliation is underscored for me in the fifth chapter of 2 Corinthians: the powerful announcement that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. This new creation rises from Jesus, who died rather than be in the sin-accounting business.

The implication for us of the gospel's transforming power is that we become ambassadors for Christ. God has entrusted to each of us the message and ministry of reconciliation.

As yet another Lutheran church body forms, we must ask how this separation in the body of Christ will serve the ministry and message of reconciliation entrusted to us by God.

The ELCA has and will continue reaching out to others for the sake of the gospel and serving our neighbor. Standing together, we are known as a church that rolls up its sleeves and solves problems, the church that is catalyst, convener and bridge builder. Our strong ecumenical relationships and global partnerships testify to that commitment. Yet before the ELCA can undertake any such efforts with a new Lutheran church body, I believe we must commit to obey the commandment against bearing false witness and commit to live its meaning in every setting, both private and public: "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light" (The Small Catechism, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1161).

A Time for Restraint but not Timidity

We live in a world that is plagued by incivility, willful misunderstanding and hurtful caricatures of those with whom one disagrees. Let us declare that such behaviors will stop with us. There is room in this church for lively conversations and disagreements about questions of faith and life. There is room in this church for vigorous dialogue that witnesses to faith without rushing to judgment and closing off discussion.

Let us be restrained in our judgments and speak charitably with and about one another. Let us not be timid as we boldly proclaim Jesus Christ and participate in God's healing of the world. Let us generously, faithfully and courageously respond to the groaning of the creation and the cries of humanity.

A Time for Rejoicing

Even in the midst of great challenges in the economy and in the church, we can rejoice because the ministry in which we are engaged is a ministry of God's mercy and reconciliation in Christ. Our ministry is not about us, our shortcomings or our problems, for we proclaim Jesus Christ. We rejoice in the forgiveness that God offers at the font and the table, in public proclamation and personal assurance. We celebrate the reconciliation from God that breaks down every dividing wall of hostility and unites humankind in the bonds of Christ. We delight in the promise of the new creation that God is bringing to life in Christ. We joyfully embrace the world and all its inhabitants in love and service. What a cause for rejoicing!

By your word, eternal God, your creation sprang forth, and we were given the breath of life. By your word, eternal God, death is overcome, Christ is raised from the tomb, and we are given new life in the power of your Spirit. May we boldly proclaim this good news in our words and our deeds, rejoicing always in your powerful presence; through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 75)

In God's grace,

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson
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