

Sermon Preached by Bishop Zeiser
At the Eucharist Concluding the 2009 Bishop's Conference

Joel 2: 23-24, 28-29; John 20: 19-23

I'm hearing voices.

Yeah, they started in the halls of the Galleria at Split Rock, around May 30th last year. Often they are gentle voices. Sometimes, though, there's fear, even anger, in the voices. The challenge comes when, at one time, they pull me in two directions.

Like the voice of the Moravian in my office. He's their point person for new church starts. "What do you say, bishop, we plant a new mission together? We did studies and we think there's real potential! Wouldn't it be a great witness to our full communion relationship?"

Then there's the other voice, the voice of the Roman Catholic bishop as we stood in the cathedral narthex. Small talk as we await the start of the processional hymn. "Keep us in your prayers," he whispered. "Next week we announce the parishes that'll close. We looked hard at this."

The Moravians: they studied. The Roman Catholics: they looked hard. But their voices tell different stories. It can be disorienting.

It can get disorienting, too, in the city streets, and out in the mountains, and along the one-lane roads that follow the creeks tucked away in the little valleys that nestle our churches. The voices on the streets, in the mountains, and in the valleys can be disorienting.

So can the driving that it takes to reach those places. For the driving, they gave me a GPS device. But that's another voice: "In point eight miles turn left... recalculating." Now *that's* disorienting!

I'm still working on what being your bishop feels like. And *it* can get disorienting. You're still working on it, too. I bet you are. Don't tell me you're not hearing voices out there that mention "Zeiser." Come on: those Evenings with the Bishop; that trip to Israel; the staff thing (and that's not quite over yet); two congregations closed; installed in *Scranton*. What are you hearing? No...better not tell me. I'm starting to get oriented.

Yeah, I've begun to "get me some orienting!" It's a little embarrassing to share with you, though. You'll think that it should've been apparent all along. But, here I am standing before you ready to put my awkward confession out there. This conference, our first synod-wide event together, is a good occasion for me to share my important discovery. You're Northeastern PA Synod rostered leaders: smart people, concerned about the church. I want you to know me.

So, Sam, is it evangelism or worship? Faith formation? What grounds me in this call? Is it administration? After all, I have to take care of synod business. To be honest, all of them can be disorienting, too. What then, Zeiser? What's your orienting insight?

Well, before I tell you what grounds me, let me tell you *how* I got grounded. Truth is that it came to me with each ordination, each installation, I've done. I won't bore you with the details. Trust me, ordaining and installing people like you – young and old dreaming dreams and seeing visions – into word and sacrament ministry has taught me things. It taught me that I'm responsible for seeing that the gospel gets out there.

That's it; that's my orienting insight. I am responsible for seeing to it that the gospel gets out there. I know – that's something I should have worked out early on. No excuses. Maybe it didn't happen the way it should have, so perhaps it's time to re-evaluate 29 years of ordained ministry. Or, I can simply move forward and "get 'er done." Move forward as bishop, grounded in a commitment to get the gospel out there. After all, Joel says that old men shall dream dreams.

That's what I want to establish with you as we close this conference. We're called to get the gospel out there. So, I'm invested big time in what has happened here since Tuesday. Invested big time because I believe that the gospel – the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ – is a saving message! No...it's THE saving message for the world; more vital even than the economic stimulus package.

It's important not only that we recognize the power of the gospel to heal and bring wholeness, but also that we have the boldness to get the healing message out there.

Here we Lutherans have an orienting insight that does so much to empower the message. It grows out of our understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus. For us, the cross bears witness that God knows the depth of human suffering and misery. We believe that in the cross God offers to all the means for healing the misery and suffering. The healing, the new life, comes to us in the body killed and the blood spilled on the cross. (That's *sacrament*.) So, we preach that in the despair, doubt, limitation, weakness, fear, and death encompassing us, we find God *there*. (That's *word*.)

Empowered by sacrament and word, we are sent out to those on the territory of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod who have not heard *any version* of the healing message, let alone the version Lutherans offer. I believe that the gospel is a gift of God meant for people in Northeastern Pennsylvania, and I want those people to hear it the way Lutheranism proclaims it. Most of all, I want them to hear it from you.

You see, I'm getting to know *you*. And you bear the grace of God in a way I admire. I have been the recipient of the gracious promise of new life in Christ from you. I can show you the email messages, the cards, the notes, the letters that bear the words that strike my faith, that builds my hope, that reminds me of my baptism, that sends me out, that gathers me with assemblies of believers...who strike my faith, that builds my hope, that reminds me of my baptism.... I can tell you the words spoken by the eyes of people

when they pull me aside and ask, “How are you doing?” Pull me aside and ask me in a way that reveals the life-giving will of the Father, the unconditional love of the Son, and the reconciling activity of the Holy Spirit. You, *you*, have borne the gospel to me out there.

And I want us to ratchet up that gospel-bearing activity out there. Dave Daubert and Tana Kjos have offered us new insights at this conference, challenged the imagination, recalled the truth and experience of those sent out long before us. If you listened closely you, like me, heard the two of them saying with one voice: “Recalculating!” They have revealed themselves to be committed, motivated, and collegial. They’ve done their part, seen to it that the gospel got out here from Illinois.

The voice of Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so....” So it falls to us to go with renewed, healed intensity. Based on the information Kenn Inskeep shared with us last year, I can hardly think of a place where the gospel is needed more. Based on what I’m getting to know about you and what has happened here since Tuesday, I can hardly think of a people who can do a better job of getting the gospel out there.

I’ll continue working on what it feels like to be your bishop. But I’ve got my orienting perspective, and I know I need your help to get the Lutheran witness to the gospel out there in northeastern Pennsylvania, not for the synod’s sake, not for Sam Zeiser’s sake, not even for your sake, but for the sake of the Risen One, Jesus the Christ.

Christ is Risen!