

This is our opportunity

“This will be your opportunity to bear witness” (Luke 21:13)

In 1958, Time Magazine published an article entitled the “The New Lutheran.” Released during Holy Week, the article described Dr. Franklin Clark Fry – the president of the United Lutheran Church – as the most influential leader of world Protestantism. The article went on to say, “People are pouring in to the Lutheran Church attracted by billboards, magazine ads, TV programs, and the Lutheran Hour... congregations are springing up at the rate of one every 54 hours” (*Time Magazine*, April 1958).

How times have changed. In the last twenty years the Lutheran Church has seen a dramatic decline. Instead of opening congregations we are closing them. Instead of sending missionaries we are bringing them home. Even worse, our church leaders have been enamored with a liberal Protestantism that speaks with certainty on social issues but with uncertainty on core theological truths. We receive statements about Palestine, sexuality, and abortion but when was the last time we received a statement on the two natures of Christ? When was the last time our leadership said anything about justification (the article by which the church stands or falls)?

Many of us wonder what to do. Do we stay or do we go? If we stay what do we say? If we go where are we to go? Questions easily enough asked but terribly difficult to answer.

I, by no means, have a simple answer for this complex issue. However, I would like to share one Scripture passage that helps me to stay in the ELCA. The passage is Luke 21:5-22. In these verses, Jesus is speaking about the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus warns his disciples that there will be destruction, false teachers, and betrayal by “parents, brothers, relatives and friends” (21:16).

Talk about a horrible situation. Home is supposed to be a place of security. But in the days preceding the destruction of Jerusalem, home became a place of strife. What is important for our predicament is that Jesus did not tell his disciples to give up or complain in some corner. Instead, he gave them a charge in verse 13: “This is your opportunity to bear witness.” Every word is important. “This” refers to the destruction of the temple, the false teachers, and the persecution within the home. “Opportunity” means a chance, occasion, and opening. “To bear witness” (*martyr*, in the Greek) means to publically proclaim Jesus in a manner that might lead to death. By saying, “This is your opportunity to bear witness”, Jesus is telling his disciples that the destruction, false teaching, and persecution, is the very opportunity, chance, occasion, and opening for his disciples to share the gospel in a public manner.

How can Jesus make such a statement? Does he mean to say that suffering actually creates the opportunity for the gospel? Does he mean to say that false charges and betrayal would be the very occasion for preaching a message of forgiveness? Yes! That is exactly what he is saying. Jesus is calling his disciples to follow the way of the cross. He is calling them to proclaim the gospel in the very midst of persecution.

For all of us who lament the state of the church these words are for us. It is true that the ELCA is in a terrible spot. We were raised with the catechism, raised to trust our church leaders, raised to have faith in Christ. Over the years we have experienced betrayal. Our catechisms are seen as unimportant. We have been forced to question our church leadership. Our simple faith in Christ is

no longer seen as relevant. The Church is supposed to be a place of security but has become a place of strife. The temptation is to leave or sulk in some corner. Instead, the gospel calls us to see that this denomination, warts and all, is the very denomination God has called us to. This is our opportunity, chance, occasion, and opening, given to us by God to bear witness. He will take care of us. He has promised: "You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish" (21:17-18). We need not fear.

With dark days ahead for the ELCA, it is my hope that many people will stay and seize this opportunity to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In your service,
The Reverend Russell Lackey