
Currents FOCUS

Room for Mystery

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I grieved when I realized the people in my congregation did not feel that they had a grace-filled faith story to tell other people. We were a group of people who were collectively walking the talk of Christian discipleship. We were living out the gospel of Jesus Christ through feeding and housing ministries. We strived to practice authentic hospitality, and our worship reflected both tradition and communal creativity. When I went out of town, I often talked about my congregation with words expressing love and joy, but most members felt ill-equipped to talk about the congregation and their faith. In response to this grief and after a great deal of research, I created a faith storytelling workshop for my congregation.

I began my theological exploration convinced that the two perspectives my Lutheran tradition has to offer the ecumenical conversation about faith storytelling are the priesthood of all believers and our being theologians of the cross. Both are confirmed as gifts in the tradition. Through the daily task of ministry and my reading, I also discovered a third gift, the room for mystery in the Lutheran tradition. Room, or openness, to mystery may not be unusual in all contexts, but I believe it is in southwestern Idaho, where I live.

About five years ago, two students attending the local Christian university began worshipping with us at Trinity Lutheran. When I asked them why they kept returning, they named our inclusive language, our hospitality, and our prescribed but contextual prayers of intercession. They said there was something else that intrigued them that was harder to name. As we entered into the drama of Lent and especially during their first Holy Week with us, we talked about how all of the ritual and even our abundant Lutheran theology leaves room for the unknown, for mystery. There are some things we believe and do that we do not have formulas to explain, and we all seem to be fine with that. I had not previously thought about this being one of our gifts to the ecumenical conversation locally or to people who might be seeking a faith community, but now I believe it is.

Lutheran historian Kirsi Stjerna's 2002 article "Rethinking Lutheran Spirituality" characterizes Lutheran spirituality by "naming some central principles and ideals for the Lutheran 'mystical'

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way."¹ Stjerna explains that Luther first understood the mystical side of his faith as follows:

His personal realization was that the God for whom he had so desperately searched had been there for him all along, not in the cell of a monk but in the Word of God and everywhere it is preached. He said that a true, merciful, and loving God was with him everywhere because of God's promise—and because of Christ's work for us, in us, and with us.²

Stjerna lifts up Luther's emphasis on the home as a starting place for the spiritual journey and describes *The Small Catechism* as a "timeless testimony to his concern for the education of the entire family and for the provision of tools for good spiritual habits and Christian living—that is, lives based on prayer, scripture, meditation, sacraments, service of others, and other catechetical principles."³

Stjerna points out that the Reformation itself included a refor-

1. Kirsi Stjerna, "Rethinking Lutheran Spirituality," *Sewanee Theological Review* 46, no. 1 (Christmas 2002): 29.

2. Stjerna, 32.

3. Stjerna, 34.

mation of spirituality, practices of piety, and theological living and that it is therefore “ironic that those born and raised in Luther’s legacy are less known for their spiritual zeal and passion than for their confessional controversies.”⁴ I recognized this irony, in one form or another, when I began work on my storytelling project.

Stjerna then begins to describe contemporary Finnish Lutheran scholarship in response to the question of how and when we become holy, a question I have wondered about more during my thirteen years in Nampa, Idaho, home to a Nazarene university and many Nazarene congregations. “The Finns,” she writes, “have truly stirred the waters by lifting up the concept of *theosis* as a way to talk about the reality and effective side of justification and the [necessity of] following holy living.”⁵ Not surprisingly, perhaps, the Finns are leading the way. I assume this is because, located at the edge of Europe, their scholars have participated in the Lutheran and Orthodox ecumenical dialogue.⁶ Tuomo Mannermaa and his school argue that the concept of participation in God (*theosis*), unification with God, is inherent in and fundamental to Luther’s theology.⁷

Stjerna summarizes Mannermaa’s reading of Luther: “‘*Theosis* is based causally on the divinity of God.’ ‘The *theosis* of the believer is initiated when God bestows on the believer God’s essential properties.’ First, God needs to effect ‘*reductio in nihilum*,’ the divine nihilizing work so that one stops trying to make oneself God and justified.”⁸ She quotes Mannermaa:

The modus of a Christian is always *passio*: a person is neither inwardly nor outwardly active; one experiences only what God affects in him or her. Luther’s concept of *theosis*, then, is understood correctly only in connection with his theology of the cross. The participation that is a real part of his theology is hidden under its opposite, the *passio*, through which one is emptied. It is not grasped in rational knowledge but only in faith.⁹

Central to this argument and understanding is participation with Christ and an understanding of Christ’s presence. Quoting Mannermaa again:

[Luther] does not distinguish between the person and the work of Christ. . . . Christ is both favor of God (forgiveness of sins, atonement, abolition of wrath) and gift (*donum*), God himself present. Faith means justification precisely on the basis of Christ’s person being present in it as favor and gift. *In ipsa fide Christus adest*: in faith itself Christ is present, and so the whole salvation.¹⁰

Stjerna lists seven principles of Lutheran spirituality. A Lutheran spirituality is God-centered, faith-centered, Word-centered, sacramental, egalitarian, catechetical and family-centered.

Stjerna continues, “Christ is the real gift in whom salvation is given and found, not ‘above’ through any kind of ladder but from ‘below,’ present in a sinful person in a new reality.”¹¹ She quotes Luther again, echoing Paul to the Galatians, “‘Christ remains in me, and that life lives in me, and the life through which I live is Christ.’ The idea of *theosis* is crucial in explaining the new life with its freedom and bondage.”¹²

Anna Mercedes, commenting on Luther’s commentary on Philippians 2, expresses the same sentiment: “Rather than an enslaved or shackled state of being, Luther sees the human form in movement and agency, fleshing out the form of care, activating servanthood. The person brought into her full humanity by Christ moves freely in action, not subjugated in passivity.”¹³

Lutheran ethicist and climate activist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda writes that Luther “affirmed the *mysterium tremendum* that God dwells not only within human beings, but within all creatures and elements: ‘[T]he power of God,’ he insisted, ‘must be essentially present in all places even in the tiniest leaf.’ God is ‘present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being,’ wrote Luther.”¹⁴

Stjerna then lists seven principles of Lutheran spirituality. A Lutheran spirituality is God-centered (“trinitarian based but Christ-centric”), faith-centered, Word-centered (it relies on the “embodied Word of Christ”), sacramental, egalitarian (“founded on the idea of the priesthood of all believers/baptized”), and sixth, is catechetical and family-centered (with *The Small Catechism* as the guide to principles of faith).¹⁵

Before moving to the seventh principle, I want to pause and expand on what Stjerna and the Finnish scholars see as the outcome of the catechetical principle. Stjerna writes, “According to Peura, ‘This is the main idea of Catechism: through faith and meditation a Christian receives the spiritual gifts in Christ and

4. Stjerna, 35.

5. Stjerna, 37.

6. Stjerna, 37.

7. Stjerna, 37.

8. Stjerna, 38.

9. Tuomo Mannermaa, as quoted in Stjerna, 38.

10. Tuomo Mannermaa, as quoted in Stjerna, 40.

11. Stjerna, 40.

12. Stjerna, 40–41.

13. Anna Mercedes, “Who Are You? Christ and the Imperative of Subjectivity,” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, ed. Mary Streufert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 89–90.

14. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “Being Church as, in, and against White Privilege,” in Streufert, 207.

15. Stjerna, 41–42.

participates in God.”¹⁶ The purpose of this participation “is not self-growth and improvement but rather the contrary; the focus is on the other, not on oneself. Because of their participation in Christ, Christians can love their neighbors.”¹⁷

The seventh principle of Lutheran spirituality is that it includes mystical elements. In her extrapolation of this principle, Stjerna cites the work of Bengt Hoffman, a “pioneer in paying attention to Luther’s spirituality and its mystical nature and elements.” She writes that Hoffman noted in Luther’s theology “the emphasis on ‘Christ in us,’ and spoke about the ‘inextricably joined’ ‘inner and outer side of faith,’ going thus against the then prevailing ‘Lutheran confessional’ stress on the idea of Christ and justification for us.”¹⁸ Hoffman himself quoted Erwin Iserloh, who also asserted that “there was in Luther’s theology a ‘continuous mystical approach’ coinciding with this deepest religious experience.”¹⁹

According to Bernard McGinn, “The mystical element within Christianity involved a form of immediate encounter with God whose essential purpose is to convey a loving knowledge . . . that transforms the mystic’s consciousness and whole way of life.”²⁰ It is true, as Stjerna points out, that Luther did not speak about “transformed consciousness or enlightened mystical knowledge as the goals” of union with God, but “Luther did speak of immediate encounter with God—in the Word. He speaks of this often and passionately, he explains it again and again, but allows that encounter to remain mystical. Perhaps we should call Luther a Word-mystic.”²¹ As a practitioner doing a project involving language, I was delighted by this insight, and I was also thankful for the way Stjerna ended her essay:

In the Western tradition we have been trained to grasp the world, one another, and God in a certain way that has led us all to suffer from some degree of autism or sensory-deprivation disorder in relation to ultimate being. We are unable to receive life fully; we are suspicious of things we cannot rationalize or control. In thinking of old and new ways of spiritual being, living, and relating, the urgent feminist challenge is to rethink all, to reboot ourselves, to empty ourselves to “know anew” as for the very first time. The God of whom Luther speaks wants to meet us, to be known and loved by us, and to fill us everywhere and in every way.²²

Delving into Luther’s formation as a medieval monk who learned to stress the importance of Scripture, historian Volker Leppin’s conclusion is like Stjerna’s. In his article, “Luther: A Mystic,” Leppin explains that in the medieval world that shaped

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Luther, a person was drawn to Jesus by a mystical experience. For Luther, what was required was hearing the gospel. Despite the two different processes, Leppin argues that the basic message remains: “God comes close to human beings who, on their own, are far from God. So, if one is not completely biased by later Lutheran or (as one might see in Barth) Reformed dogmatics, one has to conclude that there is no reason to see in Luther’s thought a contradiction between mysticism and the word of God.”²³

Being comfortable with the mysteries in our spirituality is always with me as a practitioner. I have never tried to preach or teach a series on this gift, though perhaps I should. Instead, mystery comes up in pastoral conversations, meetings, Bible studies, and group discussions. All these small, hidden, surprising corners of ministry are incredibly important.

As I went about creating a faith storytelling workshop for my congregation, I examined many tools and methods. With *theosis* and primacy of the Word as background, it seems natural that Anne E. Streaty Wimberly’s practice of story-linking made the most sense for my workshop. Wimberly describes story-linking as “a process whereby we connect parts of our everyday stories with the Christian faith story in the Bible and the lives of exemplars of the Christian faith outside the Bible.”²⁴ The workshop I created for twelve of my parishioners in February 2020, right before our daily lives were altered by a global pandemic, was well planned and intentional but had enough flexibility and room for the Lutheran mystical way. We were striving for what Douglas John Hall describes:

We are living at a moment in history when the most practical thing that the churches can do is to become theologically serious. I trust it will be understood that by theology I am not talking about mere theory, library research, or bloodless scholarship. Theology, if it deserves the name at all, is what occurs and may only occur at

16. Stjerna, 43.

17. Stjerna, 43–44.

18. Stjerna, 44.

19. Stjerna, 45.

20. Bernard McGinn, as quoted in Stjerna, 46.

21. Stjerna, 46.

22. Stjerna, 47.

23. Volker Leppin, “Luther: A Mystic,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 143.

24. Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 39.

the point where the Spirit of Jesus Christ, testified to by Scripture and Tradition, encounters the spirit of the age—the *Zeitgeist*. It happens at the juncture, if you like, of text and context.²⁵

One of the many holy and wonderful things to witness as a pastor is the biblical narrative, or one specific biblical passage, coming alive for a group of people and giving them hope for their lives. God truly does meet us, knows us, and loves us in those moments.

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25. Douglas John Hall, "Metamorphosis: For Christendom to Diaspora," in *Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 77–78.