



Congregation-based Organizing
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Delivered by Rev. Dr. Terry K. Boggs to a gathering of church leaders in Fort Worth, Texas.

I want to tell you something you already know...but you may have forgotten...and I want to share a vision. And I speak as a pastor of the church for whom the Bible is the cradle for the living address of God for this day and in this time.

The Bible does not comment on Fort Worth, or for that matter, on Dallas. The Bible, rather, is preoccupied with only one city, Jerusalem.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann writes that the Bible believes that God's will for creation is all wrapped up in creating a viable Jerusalem that will be the earthly repository for the best of God's dreams. All that we think biblically about our cities is an extrapolation from Jerusalem. Every city, including Fort Worth and Dallas, is like Jerusalem, in that there is

- Concentration of great power;
- Concentration of great wealth
- Concentration of media and so of imagination
- Concentration of hopes and social possibilities
- A collage of social institutions...churches, schools, museums, synagogues, mosques, places of learning and artistry and expertise, that seem to bespeak the goodness and presence of God, an extra measure of vitality, anticipation, and for lack of a clearer word, guts.

A city needs money, institutions, infrastructure, buildings, etc, etc. But a city also needs heart, and heart comes from speech, lyric, arts, imagination, and worship. The remarkable thing is that in this city of Fort Worth, and Dallas, there are such gifts and such possibilities. But they require honoring, heeding, enhancement, nurture, even when we wish they were not so bothersome. Indeed, the city depends on the very voices it wishes were not there.

There is a deep nervousness in our society, rooted no doubt in a deep anxiety. We know that the good old days are gone and beyond retrieval; there is, for reasons of fear and uncertainty, a deep temptation to isolation, self-protection, and greed. There is, according to market ideology, the necessity of getting more and letting the rest of the folk fend for themselves.

But a city is not a market. It has a market, but it is not a market. All around the market is a community. The community is deeper and more complex than the market, but ever so fragile, so endlessly at risk, so in need of care and protection. The city lives by those who have energy, courage, generosity, and tenacity. The powers of destruction such as fantasy, denial, despair, and passivity—have a life of their own. Whenever they prevail, we die, a little at a time. Against such dominational powers moves holiness, a relational power that recruits us into active care and active speech. That holiness will prevail into justice, mercy, and compassion is not a certitude. It is, however, a chance, a gift, a calling, and a vocation for folks like us.

Our faith traditions teach that:

- We have been created in God's image...that is, we are as human beings...according to the Holy Scriptures...a reflection of God for the world.

- We have a **God-given identity**...
- And we have **God-given purpose**...to care for... to tend...to be stewards of... what God has first created.
- God gives us our identity...and God gives us capacity to act...to do.
- God calls Abram to leave home, security, safety and to go where God was calling him...there I will bless you and make your name great...I'll give you strength, I'll give you power, I'll give you capacity, the ability to act...for what purpose?
- So that you can build great barns to store all your stuff...?
- So that you can be king/queen of the hill...?
- So that you can rest on your couch, take your ease; have the good life...?
- The dominant culture so teaches, and it does seem to resonate with our own brokenness that is deep, and not so deep, within us!

The Word of God I hear from scripture proclaims a different vision: I will bless you and make your name great...so that **all the peoples of the land will know blessing**. *I will bless you, God says, so that you will be a blessing for others.*

The vision is that all of this public blessing and action happens in community, because God created us for community.

But in our daily life we are tempted:

- To forget *God's calling*, and to *forget God's story of our identity and purpose*.
- We are tempted to go it alone, to despair, to become isolated

As a faithful organizer-priest once wrote: "These past years have been filled with struggle and adventure. As we move into these next years, the danger is that **safety will replace the struggle and success the adventure**."

We are, indeed, tempted by the dominant culture to buy into the advertising story...that meaning and purpose are found in trinkets, toys, stuff that rusts in our hands, that our identity comes in what we own, what we possess, our identity comes from a new pair of shoes.

- And God's Word from the Prophet Amos shouts to the world what we will do for a pair of shoes...(sell the poor)
- God's Word in the story of Esau and Jacob tells us what we will do for a bowl of porridge, of lentil soup...(give away...sell...our birth-right/our identity)
- God's Word in the story in the Gospels tells what we will do when our barn isn't big enough...(we will build bigger ones)
- We will sell or give away our identity...we will give away our birthright...we will sell our God-given power to act; we will give away *our capacity to participate in the creation of community*...

These years ahead should:

- Be about cultivating and deepening the art of public relationship...*belonging to, not just existing in, an organized community*
- Having the right to act in, not just gaze at, a public arena in which discourse is paramount and there is real negotiation, compromise and reciprocity.
- Our organizing vision stands counter to the dominant culture where progress and growth vie to replace community and the common good; where government control coupled with military might push out the meaningful scale of human action and moral limits; where unaccountable corporate greed and electronic images replace sacrifice and relationships.
- An invitation to participate in our society must mean more than the ability to select from a panoply of consumer choices and to vote occasionally. Participation must include an invitation to power, to resources, and to community. The power of God's love poured out for all; the power of the cross that invites us to the

true freedom to be a people of the cross...to empty ourselves, taking up the cross, to follow with Christ where Christ is leading...to be living witness...to be the living Body of Christ for this time and in this place.

- We are looking for leaders who will take the necessary risks to rebuild a public church and an active democracy, to initiate new solutions and to engage in public transformation, not just in market transactions.
- We are about creating the space in which people from throughout the community can think, develop their public life and be loyal to themselves and with their neighbors build strong community. We use this local organizing and these relationships as that public space to build and rebuild our communities.
- We are open to new ideas, new approaches, and new allies so that the “good work that has begun” can continue to grow and change. We welcome the new challenges and confrontations to enable ourselves to be stretched, and we hope the community with us.

There is a wind, a spirit, blowing...that will not be shut-up...it is, I believe, the spirit of God pressing us for just this kind of speech, pressing for courage, pressing for community, pressing for relational power, pressing for holiness. There is a wind, a spirit, blowing...it will not be shut-up.