

PASTORAL BRIEF: The Power of Hymnody

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Nothing matches the power of the gospel in word and sacrament to plant and nourish faith in the heart. Nothing matches the power of preaching and proclamation to plant the truths and the emotions of the gospel in the heart. But of all the secondary tools that support the proclamation and retention of the gospel nothing surpasses the power of hymnody. By hymnody I am not referring merely to the fact that we regularly sing hymns during our services but to the fact that over a lifetime of worship we accumulate a storeroom of hymns that are tied to the rites of the church year and to the events of our lives. The hymn becomes attached to the event, and the hymn in turn attaches the events to our memories.

I was reminded of this recently as I sat near the front of the church as Lutheran Christians marched by me to receive the Lord's Supper. As they passed, many of them were not just marching, but they were singing, "Lord, may your body and your blood be for my soul the highest good." In the beginning the stanzas were there too, "I come, O Savior to your table . . ." "Unworthy though I am, O Savior . . ." As we got deeper into the hymn, the marchers needed the prompt of the first line before they could join in. Finally all that was left was "Lord, may your body and your blood be for my soul the highest good." The refrain had attached itself to the heart and had the power to reinforce the meaning of the event.

When I was growing up, it was not Lent until we sang, "Jesus, I will ponder now on thy holy passion. With thy Spirit me endow for such meditation." "Ah, I also and my sins wrought thy deep affliction. This indeed the cause has been of thy crucifixion."

Sometimes a hymn can take on new associations from an event. Early in my ministry our small congregation in Pennsylvania was hosting a touring choir for the first time. It was a special event for the congregation but maybe especially for the children of our tiny Sunday school who for the first time could sing with a large choir, "Jesus, Shepherd of the Sheep, who your Father's flock does keep, safe we wake and safe we sleep, guarded still by you." An old hymn received a new emotional connection.

I am sure our son does not remember his first emotional encounter with the power of Lutheran hymnody. We were attending the commun-

ion service of the Michigan District Convention in Saginaw, Michigan. He was a small baby in arms, a few months old, resting quietly. As the large assembly broke out in "Lord, thee I love with all my heart," his eyes got as big as saucers and his head popped up, but he did not cry. An auspicious introduction to the power of Lutheran hymnody!

This emotional connection might be formed the first time you hear a new hymn. When I left that very closely knit congregation to become a professor at Dr. Martin Luther College, I arrived in mid-year and one of the first events was the Christmas concert, and the processional of the women's choir was "Once in Royal David's City." In the pain of separation from friends who were very dear, how good it was to hear for the first time, "Not in that poor lowly stable, with the oxen standing by, shall we see him, but in heaven, set at God's right hand on high. Then like stars his children crowned, all in white, his praise will sound."

Sometimes the memories are the accumulation of a lifetime. More rarely they may come from a single hearing. I can still hear a song that I heard only once, more than forty years ago, "Heavenly Father, hear us as we pray, here at your altar on our wedding day."

It does not matter so much whether a family's Thanksgiving memories are turkey and dressing, or lutefisk and lefse, or pizza, but it does matter whether or not they have memories cemented in their minds. It does not matter whether the specific hymns that mark the milestones of your life and mine are the same or different, old or new, but it does matter whether we have such milestones and such memories.

It is not a pastor's responsibility to create such milestones and memories for his people, but it is his responsibility to create the environment in which such memories can grow and thrive. Above all, the pastor must be a student of the Bible and the catechism, but he must always remain a student of the hymnal. At the start of each season of the church year, he needs to be like the wise owner of a house who goes to the storage room and carefully selects and sets out treasures old and new for the enjoyment and the benefit of his family. He must be like the loving mother who plans for her family menus of old favorites and new delights. From the buffet which she lays out some members of the family will choose this, others will choose that, but all of them will be nourished by a balanced diet that will sustain them through all the conditions of life. If the pastor is a wise manager of the community storehouse, his people will become wise homeowners who can select from their own storeroom treasures old and new.

Lutheran Christians hope that the last words of their life will be a passage or a prayer, but it would not be so bad if the last words were a hymn, "Lord, let at last your angels come, to Abram's bosom bear me home, that I may die unfearing. . . ."