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Church Relations Update

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The Precious Power of Persistence



By Dale Schrag

Of the myriad memorable stories in Kathleen Norris' *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, one of my favorites concerns a young seminary student who asks an Orthodox theologian,

"What am I to do . . . when I have difficulty affirming parts of the Creed—like the Virgin Birth?" The theologian replies, "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it. You just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually." Raising his voice, the student protested, "How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?" The priest replied, "It's not your creed, it's our creed [meaning the Creed of the entire Christian church] . . . Eventually it may come to you . . . for some, it takes longer than for others." [p. 65]

I've thought of this story a number of times this past semester. Once it was when I came to realize how important our weekly structured prayer time had become for me. Our structured prayer time takes place on Friday mornings at 7:30 a.m. It is directed by two associate pastors: Ruth Harder from the Bethel College Mennonite Church, and Nathan Koontz from Faith Mennonite Church. It is based on *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*. The session lasts for a half hour; we do some singing; offer general prayers of thanksgiving; read some scripture; and offer prayers of intercession, for family, for community, for church, and for the world. We close with the Lord's Prayer and pass the peace of Christ to each person present. (Oh, and we also drink fresh coffee and eat fresh baked goods prepared by members of Bethel College

Mennonite Church or Faith Mennonite Church!)

I confess that for a long, long time I was not much of a fan of these kinds of public prayer events. It has something to do with my understanding of Matthew 6:6; it has something to do with a feeling that if one is only praying silently, one is not quite participating appropriately; but then when one prays aloud, one wonders if it's only being done out of a sense of obligation—everyone else is doing it, so you'd better do it too.

I don't know exactly when the transformation occurred, but I know that it did. This half hour has become one of my most important moments of the week. I can't imagine missing it. I can lead out in prayer if I am so moved, or stay silent for the entire time, and I never struggle with feeling inauthentic or pressured in any way. I pass the peace of Christ to persons with whom I am not particularly close in any way other than the fact that we are both consistent participants in the structured prayer time, but I do so with great depth of feeling. It helps me understand how it was that the earliest Christian church could evidence remarkable diversity—aristocrats and slaves, men and women, Jews and Gentiles; and how it was that outsiders could nevertheless look upon this disparate group and say, "see how they love each other." And the transformation? To paraphrase the Orthodox theologian Norris quotes, "You just keep [doing] it. It will come to you eventually."

I thought of Norris' story again after watching a fabulous production of *Agnes of God* on the Bethel stage this fall. It was superbly directed, brilliantly acted, a powerful production. The play has only three characters: a supremely rational, devoted-to-science psychiatrist; a mother superior who wants to leave room for mystery and miracle; and a

simple nun with a beautiful voice who has given birth to a baby who was found dead in a wastebasket. I'd seen the movie years before, and while I can't say I remember all that much about it, I'm sure that I would have identified most closely with the psychiatrist—confident that, whatever the circumstance, reason and science can explain just about everything that calls for an explanation. This time I found myself identifying almost totally with the mother superior, absolutely comfortable with the possibility of mystery and miracle. Why the transformation? Again, to quote the Orthodox theologian, "Eventually it may come to you . . . for some, it takes longer than for others."

The advice of this Orthodox theologian reminds me of something I heard Patty Shelly, professor of Bible and religion, share with our Vocation Seminar class several years ago. Patty was summarizing her own personal credo to the class. I remember her asking the rhetorical question, "What do you do when the Sunday morning worship services are no longer 'working' for you?" Her answer? "You keep going to church." She didn't say, "You just keep [doing] it. It will come to you eventually," but I think that's exactly what she meant!

This is, of course, a profoundly counter-cultural sentiment. Our society preaches in myriad ways a doctrine of self-centeredness and self-gratification. The thought that one would persist in a practice that was less than enjoyable or fulfilling or immediately satisfying is absurd according to the world's calculus. But "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." (Isaiah 55:8) In this Holy Season, that's a truth that's well worth pondering . . . persistently.

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Good News

This fall the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory, an evaluation instrument used by hundreds of colleges and universities, was administered to a random sample of the Bethel College student population. Because there is significant expense associated with using this survey instrument, our practice has been to administer the survey every other year instead of every year. As a result, the comparison data for this year's results would be data gathered in the fall of 2008.

Since the data are compared against results from national (and regional) four-year private institutions, the survey utilizes a standard set of questions to determine student satisfaction with a given institution. I'm pleased to report that the level of satisfaction for Bethel students exceeds national and regional norms for four-year private colleges in almost all categories. And in addition, each institution is allowed to include some questions that are unique to that institution in order to ascertain internal trends in student satisfaction levels on some specific issues. Among the unique questions that Bethel included were the following:

- *Being on this campus is contributing to my spiritual growth.*
- *My understanding of God is being strengthened by classroom and/or campus experiences.*
- *Faculty, administrators, and/or staff are helpful to me in processing issues related to my faith.*

For each of these questions, the 2010 results were significantly better than the 2008 results. (Note: those 2008 results were comparatively strong. What's significant here is the positive direction of the trend line.) We clearly have much for which to be thankful!

Spring Break Choir Tour

Those of you in the Pacific Northwest will have the opportunity to hear the Bethel College Choir in concert this spring. After an opening concert at the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita on Friday evening, 18 March, at 7:30 p.m., the choir will be flying from Wichita to Spokane, Washington, on Saturday, 19 March (thanks to an extraordinarily generous donation by a Bethel College alumna). A 56-passenger bus will meet the choir at the airport and transport the singers to the following venues:

- Saturday, 19 March: St. Aloysius Church, Spokane, Washington, 1:00 p.m.
- Sunday, 20 March: Menno Mennonite Church, Ritzville, Washington, 10:00 a.m.
- Sunday, 20 March: Seattle Mennonite Church, Seattle, Washington, 7:00 p.m.
- Monday, 21 March: Portland Mennonite Church, Portland, Oregon, 7:00 p.m.
- Tuesday, 22 March: Zion Mennonite Church, Hubbard, Oregon, 7:00 p.m.
- Wednesday, 23 March: Lebanon Mennonite Church, Lebanon, Oregon, 7:00 p.m.
- Thursday, 24 March: Salem Mennonite Church, Salem, Oregon, 7:00 p.m.
- Saturday, 26 March: Mission Dolores Basilica, San Francisco, California, 7:00 p.m.

The choir will fly back to Kansas from San Francisco, leaving very early on Sunday morning. The home concert will be Sunday evening, 27 March, 7:00 p.m. in Memorial Hall on the Bethel campus.