

LUTEFISK LESSONS

Luke 3:7-18

3rd Sunday In Advent

December 16, 2012

Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

In my previous congregation we had a man by the name of Lloyd Carrigan. And one thing about Lloyd is that he loved Lutefisk. In fact, he loved it so much that he and his wife Shirley helped lead our congregation's annual Scandinavian/Lutefisk Dinner.

A few months ago I was informed that Lloyd had died, and upon hearing this news, I wrote this tribute concerning Lloyd. The reason I was motivated to do this is that not only did Lloyd love lutefisk, but he also loved Jesus and he loved his church. And he was a good friend of mine.

The other reason I wrote this tribute is that I believe Lloyd's example teaches us some important lessons about the mission and ministry of Christ's church, and of Jesus' call to go and make disciples of all nations. Please bear with these observations and analogies.

The first analogy is that Lloyd loved this meal, this time of fellowship so much, that he was willing to tell everyone about it. He wasn't afraid to go up to a stranger and tell them about this meal or invite them to come and see for themselves.

And he wasn't afraid to recruit others to help prepare and serve this meal. He had a way of getting others excited about this goal and how important their help would be. Lloyd's excitement and passion was infectious to others and everyone loved serving with him.

Now it is obvious that one of the church's main problems with sharing the good news of Jesus with others, and with following Christ's command to grow his church, is that very few people are as excited or have the passion and infectious spirit like Lloyd.

Church for many has become something one simply does for themselves rather than as a mission to be passed on. Some feel they need to leave evangelism up to the pastor or to a paid staff person. And some just don't know Jesus in a way that fills them with much joy.

The Scandinavian Dinner would never have happened if Lloyd had said he would leave it up to the pastor or would let someone else do it. The church definitely needs more people who are excited and passionate about Christ's mission, and who allow the Holy Spirit to empower them to be a leader in getting others excited. God is relying on people just like you.

A second analogy is that Lloyd knew the importance of good quality lutefisk and good food. He made sure that they did not get just any old fish or any old ingredients. And many said that the lutefisk, sausage, herring and other foods were some of the best they had eaten.

Today in the church we often don't follow that lead when we offer the food of the Gospel that is not the best quality. Worship can easily become dull and routine. Messages can easily lack depth, relevance, practical application and challenge.

A spirit of love and joy can easily be dimmed by a church promoting divisive political issues and by church people with a pharisaic attitude. Programs can easily become lacking in energy and mission can easily become something people feel they simply have to do. The seven deadliest words in the church are: "We've never done it that way before."

Lloyd knew that if the food wasn't good people wouldn't come. And the same thing is true of the food of Christ's mission and ministry in this world today. It is important that we do whatever we can to find the best ingredients, along with the best preparation and creativity, so the food of Christ's love is fresh, tasty and nourishing.

A third analogy is that Lloyd knew that not everyone would like lutefisk the way he did and not everyone would savor the same foods. So Lloyd would tell people there was plenty of variety so each one could find something to fill them up.

Lloyd could have easily said that the Swedish way or the Norwegian way of making these foods is right, and pure, so either you like it this way or you shouldn't come. Butter sauce, or cream sauce, is the only right way.

Either that or someone could say that this is the way they remember this fish from their childhood so everyone else should like it the way they remember it. In other words it is all about me and what I like. It would also be easy to say that a truly pure understanding of this meal should only offer lutefisk—period.

And yet Lloyd made sure there was butter and cream sauce; that there were meatballs and potatoes; that there were breads and butter; that there was wonderful cooked sausage; that there was rice pudding and Christmas cookies. Everyone was welcome to this meal even if you were not Scandinavian—there was plenty of food for everyone's tastes.

In the church of Jesus Christ through the years there has often been the attitude that our brand of worship, or our hymnbook, is right and theologically pure, and if someone comes to our church they either need to like it or they can lump it. And unfortunately many in our Lutheran church are lumping it—several hundred thousand have left our church the past few years.

Not everyone today grew up Norwegian, or Swedish, or traditional Lutheran, or with classical musical training, or whatever. So we need to offer more variety and options to meet the tastes of many. The Apostle Paul said that he was willing to become many things in order to win the few.

A fourth analogy is that Lloyd was not afraid to empower multiple leaders and volunteers to help with this meal. He had one person who drove to the Princeton area to get what some believed was the best herring; he had another person drive to another place to get some great lutefisk; he had others who worked on decorating the tables and fellowship hall; he had his own children, spouses, grandchildren and friends help with the serving. Lots of different people were involved.

In fact, Lloyd had so many people involved that he and his wife Shirley were able to actually sit and eat this dinner with the other guests. All of his good preparation and willingness to empower others meant the meal was not about him but was a collaborative effort with many involved.

In the church today there is often a belief that pastors or special people of influence need to be front and center. Lloyd, however, understood Martin Luther's focus on the "priesthood of all believers." He helped these helpers and volunteers know and believe that they were as important as anyone. Whatever job you had was equally important. People truly felt affirmed.

It is so important in the church today that we follow this lead. It is so important that all people be given the opportunity to use their gifts, to be set free to make a difference. And in that it is important that pastors and church hierarchy, along with certain archaic traditions, get out of the way so the joy of serving can shine forth.

The fifth and final analogy is that Lloyd loved to laugh and he wanted the Scandinavian Dinner to be filled with joy and fun. And in that he was even willing to put up with many "groaner" Norwegian/Swedish jokes that I told for 20 years at this dinner.

And the funny thing is that there were many people in attendance each year who said that one of the highlights was to hear these jokes. Many studies have found that smiling and laughter are very important for one's health, life and relationships. Laughter releases endorphins that can lift one's spirit and can help a person to be more hope-filled.

In the church today we often have forgotten the importance of laughter. Our worship is often formal and staid, and if someone claps or shouts "amen" they are looked on with suspicion. And if a pastor attempts to tell a humorous story the response is often slow and the laughter not too much. (Story of a Norwegian Lutheran—don't tell joke on Saturday—laugh in church next day)

And yet the biggest challenge with laughter is how pastors, and church leaders, often take themselves way too seriously and cannot laugh at themselves. If we the leaders of the church have a difficult time making worship and programs joyful, and fun, how do we expect lay people to find joy in living for Jesus?

The Apostle Paul said in Philippians, "*Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.*" The Psalmist says, "*Shout to the Lord; come before him with thanksgiving and praise.*"

Lloyd was a man who lived with the joy of the Lord in his heart and he openly reflected that joy to others. Even in his own health challenges of having a major infection where he nearly died, and where he lost one leg, he found much joy in life. Lloyd loved to laugh.

Yes, Lloyd loved lutefisk. He could eat plate load after plate load and never get too full. In the same way he could never get enough of Jesus' love, of Jesus' promises, and of Jesus' joy—his worship each week was a witness to his faith. I thank God for people like Lloyd, and for many others like you, who allow your life to shine forth the mission of Christ's church.