

“It’s not what we do”

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



At the end of the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John, many disciples who had been following Jesus left him. Looking at the 12, Jesus asked, “Will you also go away?” Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal

life” (John 6:66-68). It was a kind of crisis at the beginning of the Jesus movement.

Jesus had been teaching about the gracious gift of life that comes from the Father through Christ. People were amazed by the multiplication of the loaves and fish and all of the talk about the bread of life. They wanted to know what they had to do to be doing the works of God. Jesus’ answer, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent (John 6:29),” didn’t sit well the crowd. I suspect that the most fervent among them wanted marching orders and the more careful wanted a checklist to make sure they were on track.

Questions in Scripture are fascinating; they are often more revealing than the answers. “What do *we* do?” “Teacher, what good deed must *I* do to have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16). The people in John and the young man in Matthew wanted to know not only what they could do to save themselves, but to be assured that it was indeed in their power to save themselves.

We don’t ask different questions today. When it comes to the great metaphysical questions we ask, “How do *I* know? How am *I* sure?” It’s a hard thing to believe that it’s God’s good and gracious will that all be saved from death, and since we can’t save ourselves, God has done it through Jesus’ death and resurrection. It’s not what we do or even about that which we are certain, but what God has done, and God’s faithful and sure promise. In a recent survey of ELCA Lutherans, Kenneth Inskeep, director for research and evaluation, asked the question: “What must you do to be saved?” Fifty percent answered: “Do good works.” Fifty percent of Lutherans.

At least half of us admit that, deep down, we believe it’s still up to us. Let’s not beat ourselves up—this isn’t a Lutheran phenomenon, this is not


an American phenomenon, this is not a 21st-century phenomenon—it’s a human phenomenon. We either disbelieve for joy or don’t want to give up control.

This is precisely why we need well-trained confessional, scriptural, theological, liturgical, compassionate pastors and deacons: to keep us pointed to Jesus, to the law, to the cross, to the resurrection and away from the world’s siren song of self-help, self-determination and self-righteousness.

And this is precisely why we need confessional, scriptural, theological, liturgical, compassionate laypeople: so we “... fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God’s word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it” (Martin Luther’s Small Catechism).

Two major initiatives requested by the ELCA Church Council and informed by your input have come to the same conclusion. The Theological Education Advisory Council and the Called Forward Together in Christ process both lifted up the importance of well-formed lay, consecrated and ordained leadership. We must keep the saving gospel of judgment and promise as our foundation and future.

This is the work of the entire church. It’s not up to the seminaries to identify and recruit pastors and deacons, nor is it the exclusive province of the ordained and consecrated to be grounded in the word. Start looking at fourth- and fifth-graders in your congregation. Support church camps, Lutheran campus ministries, and Lutheran colleges, universities and seminaries. Encourage Young Adults in Global Mission.

We’ve received a \$3 million gift to the ELCA Fund for Leaders, which will provide full tuition scholarships for up to 60 additional students over the next three years. This is just one part of a multifaceted leadership initiative that we are launching now. When people ask how the ELCA can be relevant, I answer: only if we are sure that our hope is in the living Christ and only if we share that with the joy of the gospel. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.