

# Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



June 26, 2022, Vol. 2, Issue 23

## Faith Practices

"It feels like a mockery to me," one woman said. I was leading a Bible study where the subject of the rosary had arisen. I was her pastor and knew she wasn't alone. Most Lutherans don't like the rosary. "We don't have to do beads to earn points," she continued. "Forgiveness is already there!"

Over the years I've heard this sentiment many times from exasperated Lutherans. They would ask: "Wasn't that what the Protestant Reformation was about—declaring once and for all that we are saved by God's grace and not by works?" Yes, but that's not the whole story. That we pray is important, but how we pray is even more so. If we only pray for what we need and want, we are shaping ourselves to be narrow and selfish. If we pray for the things of God's kingdom, we will be drawn into the realities of that kingdom. Bible reading can help lead in that direction. *How we practice our faith helps us grow.*

Years ago, as I was riding with Pastor Chuck to a hospital visit, he said, "There's something you've got to try." He described how he prayed and read his Bible every day and how awesome it was. I was skeptical. I was young and heading to the seminary, and this sounded like "works righteousness," trying to earn God's grace and forgiveness by what we do—so many scripture verses, so many "Hail Marys" to stay in God's good graces. I'd known Pastor Chuck most of my life; he was a smart guy and deeply Lutheran. "How?" I asked. "How has it changed your life?" He said he couldn't quite explain, but he'd found it life changing. I told him I'd give it a try.

The next Sunday he handed me a small book entitled *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*. That night I sat down, opened it to the day's date, and started praying and reading. To my surprise, I liked how I felt afterward. I wasn't necessarily joyous and happy. I just felt...better, in a way I hadn't felt before. I did this for days, then months, finally for years. It became an important habit. It was a great blessing, but I know it had nothing to do with salvation and forgiveness, which was weird because that's what I thought the Reformation and being Lutheran were all about. They aren't. Faith practices determine how you live your life in response to God's gift of grace.

Kirsi Stjerna, professor of Lutheran history and theology at Pacific Lutheran Seminary, explained to me that for Martin Luther, faith practices were *more* important than doctrine. Doctrine came later. The 95 Theses, the traditional starting point of the Reformation, were actually written to protect the faith of the average person, to, in fact, protect the *faith practices* of the average person. She said, "The Reformation began because Luther wanted to reform the daily lives of ordinary people. That's why, for instance, Luther focused on music and wrote hymns for congregational singing, and on translating the Bible and why he wrote the catechism so parents could use it to teach their children faith at home." *Faith practices are very Lutheran.*

The woman from Bible study had been thinking about the rosary as *justification*, something that forgives sins. Luther's doctrine of justification teaches that forgiveness and salvation are gifts of God's grace received through faith. *But justification has nothing to do with faith practices.* Luther discussed faith practices in his doctrine of sanctification. Once I received the gift of God's forgiveness and salvation, I started striving to be more like Christ, and that's sanctification. I prayed more, read my Bible more, looked for ways to be of service, strove to give more. But I didn't do these things to get into heaven. I did them in response to God's goodness. These faith practices are a result of how the Spirit works in me, helping me grow as a child of God.

I told the woman, "I've done the rosary." She was stunned. I went on, "It's just a way to pray, and the daily practice of prayer and Bible reading has changed my life." She agreed with that and suggested that everyone should give them a try.

**Daily prayer and Bible reading: It's a very Lutheran thing to do.**

Adapted from an article by Pr. Scott Seeke in *Living Lutheran*