

Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



August 28, 2022, Vol. 2, Issue 30

Freed to Ask Difficult Questions (Part 2)

In *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* theologian Letty Russell talks about the challenge of a world of abundant difference and more than abundant experiences of exclusion and suffering often rooted in a disdain for 'other.' She says that in God's sight there is no 'other.' In this way Russell calms fears about asking difficult questions in a faith context because God is always working on the margins, even the margins of our knowledge and imagination. By engaging those margins, we engage the possibility and promise that God, who brings peace out of fear and life out of death, can bring about something new.

Those in power can be the most averse to questions, a fact well known by people who traditionally lack it. Questioning power structure tends to do some undermining. However, considering questions from the perspective of hospitality may prompt not only new wondering but new welcomes and ways of being. A black female student at Wartburg Theological Seminary, expresses, "It has been very freeing to know that you can question Scripture, you can even challenge Scripture, because of grace. But I've been struck by how little we've articulated that truth within our congregations. When a pastor begins to teach that it's possible to question and imagine, that can be very disorienting to the people in the pews." She goes on to say that those steeped in a tradition want things to remain the way they are—no questions asked. Somehow, they want God to be that one thing that is staid and sure—which he/she/it is—but God is big enough to handle our questions. How can we equip people to question and learn new things?

Does the ELCA, but more importantly, local congregations of the ELCA, have the capacity and courage to consider new ways of thinking and being? Most theological frameworks, liturgical traditions, preaching styles and cultural reference points stem from a white male, northern European perspective. Those are our roots. The pulpit has now been open to women for more than fifty years, but in many ways whoever occupies that pulpit must somehow morph into a white male in articulation of theology. Can grace—the cornerstone tradition the Lutheran church offers to the broader church—affect our understanding of not only God's ultimate welcome to *all* people but also the collateral Christian welcome to all people, and consequent new self-understandings of the people of God?

Lutheran philosopher Tom Christenson loved questions such as these. He sought to cultivate a culture of questions, especially in the church and at Lutheran liberal arts colleges. Some forty years ago he preached a sermon based on Psalm 77—itsself a litany of questions—that began, "It is unfortunate that we do not have a place in our liturgy for the asking of questions. We confess our sin, proclaim God's grace, preach God's word; we praise, witness, affirm, etc. But we have no sacred occasion for questions, no rite of puzzlement."

To be continued...

Anna Madsen in *Living Lutheran* (April. 2022)