

Spiritual and religious

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



Is “Lutheran spirituality” an oxymoron? When we consider Martin Luther and the early reformers, we think of great theologians, prolific writers and musicians. We are well aware of Luther’s earthy language and direct communication. But spirituality? Luther as mystic?

Not so much. And yet, Luther was a deeply spiritual person who also cared for the spiritual well-being of his parishioners.

Luther was a monk before he was a college professor and reformer. By his own account he out-monked everyone in his monastery. He took his vows seriously. He longed for God. He wrestled with God. He argued with God. Well before he came to an understanding of grace, Luther nevertheless knew that his life was found in God. He was spiritual *and* religious.

“Spirituality” covers a lot of things. Church historian and writer Martin Marty once said: “‘Spirituality’ is the code word used to convey everything from profound quests to warm tingles between the toes.”

As a parish pastor I often heard people declare that they were spiritual and not religious. I was suspicious that this was an excuse for not coming to church, but I now think there is more to it than that. We are created to search for meaning. Mary Jane Haemig, a professor at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., wrote: “Today people hear many words but long for authentic words and authentic relationships. They ask whether they can trust what they hear and whether they can trust that anyone will hear what they say. This longing for authentic communication is part of the longing for relationship. The church can help people identify that this longing includes a longing for God.”

This issue’s cover story is about prayer (page 14). Even in an increasingly secular society, prayer in some form is practiced by most Americans. What happens when we pray? Why do we pray? How

should we pray? Is prayer just a lot of words spoken into emptiness? Is prayer efficacious?

Luther wasn’t too worried about these questions. He was more concerned that people actually did pray, that they were in communication with God who hears prayer, commands us to pray and gives us the words we need through the Spirit. He could be pretty blunt: “You must learn to call. Do not sit by yourself or lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Do not destroy yourself with your own thoughts by worrying. Do not strive and struggle to free yourself, and do not brood on your wretchedness, suffering and misery. Say to yourself: ‘Come on, you lazy bum; down on your knees, and lift your eyes and hands toward heaven!’”

For Luther, God was real, and this real God wants real people to be in real communication with God. We are not to fret about elegant phrases or creative and original prayers. We shouldn’t worry about folding hands or raising hands or standing or kneeling. It’s not about technique. Prayer is about relationship with God. God has created us for God’s self and we are not whole apart from this relationship.

And it is here that this Lutheran began to understand and resist and, finally, imperfectly come to know and trust God more deeply. There is a little stubbornness in me. I like to be in charge. I want to set the terms of engagement. I will decide when God can come in. But here is the truth: God is already and always present.

Luther wrote: “The entire divine nature is wholly and entirely in all creatures, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself.” That kind of makes resistance pointless.

Prayer is an invitation into divine love. Prayer is God seeking us. In God’s seeking, in God’s speaking and listening we find ourselves. **L**

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