

Russian Correspondent November 2017

The Kingdom of God is Like....

Lately I've been supply preaching for the Anglican congregation of St. Petersburg; the texts we've been reading are familiar to many of you - the Gospel of Matthew's (sometimes difficult) parables of the Kingdom. While working with these texts, I've been reminded of a Bible study that I took part in when a delegation from the ELCA Central States Synod was visiting Russia earlier this fall. The Bible study leader asked: "what does the kingdom of God look like?" As I remember it, we were asked to consider this in a very concrete way.

"Where do we see God's reign around us?" is a central question for Christian mission; I frequently bring the issue before those who take part in seminars that I lead. When considering my own answer, I tend to think about processes and patterns rather than specific people. And so I found that reminder - that God's grace is worked out in the lives of individuals and their communities - to be very important. During the past few months, I started to pay greater intentional attention to fixing images in my mind of God's continuing work in and on us. Here are a few:

The Kingdom of God looks like this photo (upper right), with Area Dean and Synod President Andrey Dzhamgarov, an ethnic Armenian, in his congregation on the Volga, where a German-Russian "babuska," a local young professional and an international student are united in a faith community that has given them support and challenged them to grow.



who were instrumental in leading congregations in Siberia during the years of Soviet repression.

The Kingdom of God looks like this picture on the right, too. As I spent a week with pastors and lay ministers from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kyrgyzstan, I was inspired by their energy, their dedication, their commitment. Being with them reminded me how life in the Kingdom sometimes means being a tiny minority in unfavorable circumstances. Instead of taking the easier way out and emigrating (most could if they so chose), our fellow Christians there put all their efforts into serving those who surround them - through faithful preaching of the Gospel, through service to prisoners, orphans and others in need.

I saw the Kingdom of God looking like this (left below) on October 31st at the celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. As I wrapped my arms around my sons, we listened to representatives from all major branches of Christianity share their thoughts on the significance of the events we were commemorating. We were blessed to do so in St. Peter and Paul's Cathedral in Moscow, a building that has emerged from the 70-year winter (part of the time of which the church was the "Artic" movie theater), to a spring of new life.



I hope as you read this newsletter, you might feel that you, too, are part of the Kingdom, both by the ways you are engaged in your communities and through the ways you support your fellow Christians (including in the Lutheran Church in the former Soviet Union) in places far away.

Your brother in Christ, Bradn



CPE

Much of my ministry here is teaching; at other times my role as a pastor comes to the forefront. Yet another significant aspect of my work is related to organizing educational processes; one of the concrete ways I try to do that is to put together the right students with the right teachers.

This year this included two important events – the September seminar on men's ministry (see below), and the first in a series of seminars on pastoral care. The approach for the latter is called Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), and it is what most pastors in America go through as a part of their Master of Divinity program. A long-time friend of our church from Germany, Kurt Schmidt, is a CPE teaching supervisor; he and I have been working together to attempt to not only run the full course of CPE, but also to go further and train a few teaching supervisors who can act as founding members of the Russian Association of Pastoral Care and Counseling.

While it will take a couple of years to reach this goal, I could hardly be more pleased with our progress so far. The group of participants was made up of 12 men and women (half pastors and half lay leaders), most of whom had previously expressed to me their desire to get further education in this area. Yet the approach to learning in CPE is so different than the lecture approach that is familiar to

them; we were not sure how smoothly the course would run. Additionally when a group comes together to work on pastoral care, difficult issues (including deeply personal ones) are raised; it is typical for there to be resistance, tension and conflict as part of the process. To our surprise, however, all of the participants displayed



openness to one another, to a new kind of learning, and to the self-discovery that is necessary for quality pastoral care. The 10 days they spent in Novosaratovka were very productive.

While students evaluations in Russia tend to avoid specifics, after this course I saw a pattern of positive results: *“I learned how to listen;” “I saw how important it was to avoid giving direct advice and to instead accompany the care-seeker as he/she finds his own solutions;” “I now realize that... empathy is at the center of pastoral care.” “My job as a pastoral care giver is to be a sojourner along the path of life that the Lord has given us.”*

For some of the participants the seminar was transforming on a personal and professional level: *“I understood that pastoral care is interesting to me, is a gift God has given to me;” “Before this seminar I saw pastoral care from a different perspective and what I learned is really valuable and important;” “This... was a turning point in my understanding of the means and methods of pastoral ministry;” “I thought about...aspects of my life that I hadn't considered before;” After this seminar “I feel healthier spiritually and physically. I've been sleeping like I haven't slept since I was a child. Many thanks once again for accompanying me on the way, for caring about the healing of my soul.”*

By the end of the seminar the participants were so motivated to continue their studies that we moved up the schedule; while I had planned on one seminar in each of the next two years, we've decided that it is desirable and possible to do parts two and three in June and October of 2018.

There are at least another six people waiting to take part in the next round of such a course, so I will continue to pray for Kurt's ability to come to Russia to teach, for the financial gifts to the “Equipping...” program to keep coming in order to make the funding of the seminar possible, and the support of the church's leadership as we attempt to make pastoral care a significant part of the life of our congregations.

Men's Ministry

Getting men involved in our communities of faith has proven to be a challenge. It was a blessing, then, when early this fall fourteen men left their homes in cities as far west as Crimea and as far east as Krasnoyarsk in order to meet in Omsk for a seminar for leaders of men's ministry.

The theme of the seminar - "Brotherhood" - was highlighted by former ELCUSFE Bishop, Volker Sailer, during Bible studies, while Pastor and Area Dean for Siberia Vladimir Vinogradov put together an interesting program with practical and team-building exercises that not only were effective for the group, they also served as an example for what could be done in other locations. Together the men were able to open up about their experiences as disciples of Christ, as sons, husbands and fathers, and to support one another. As one of the participants put it, when they left they had a renewed sense that taking responsibility for the church's life is "not something that should be hoisted onto the shoulders of our mothers, grandmothers, and sisters;" it is important that men carry their share.

It is my conviction that restoring a sense of balance and of mutual responsibility will do much to improve the health of our congregations. We still have some way to go. Two of our aims with this seminar - that we would bring together those already highly experienced in the field and that we could bring in participants from other countries - went unrealized. We've decided to do one more push in this direction 2018 - we hope that in May more participants from the former USSR will be able to attend and that we can come together to work on a concrete program of activities that the leaders will then be able to replicate in their home regions.



Visits to Omsk

While I live in St. Petersburg and travel through most all of Russia, there is probably no city that I visit more frequently than Omsk. I go there not only because it is the site of the office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Urals, Siberia and Far East, but also because of its central location, wonderful facilities and active congregation. Since my last newsletter in the spring, I've made three trips to Omsk - first for the annual pastor's meeting (which this year was united with a theological conference and installation of new bishop, Alexander Scheiermann, picture below), then to accompany and translate for a delegation from the Central States Synod, and finally to lead the annual seminar for lay leaders held after synod assembly. This year the goal was to examine the 95 Theses, the Catechisms, and the Smalcald Articles.

Maxim Shekker, a lay preacher from the west Siberian city of Tjumen, wrote this (in part) in an article about that seminar for the synod newsletter: *Pastor Bradn Buerkle spoke in a exciting and unordinary way about the history of the 95th Theses...explaining why they appeared on October 31, 1517 (neither later or earlier); this shined a light on many factors which were not so obvious at first but which were quite possibly decisive in their further quick spreading throughout Europe. The life and activity of Martin Luther were shown from a new perspective; this helped participants see...the logic and internal consistency of these works against the multifaceted historical background of political, military, and religious powers in Europe of the time. The game we played with case studies based on these Reformation texts was both entertaining and a good way to remember the knowledge we had received... I thank God for this seminar, for fellowship with sisters and brothers from various corners of our big Church...and also for fellowship with brothers from different countries, who by sharing with us their spiritual experience contribute to our growth in knowing Jesus.*



Bishkek

In early October I had the pleasure and the privilege of traveling to Bishkek in order to spend a week with brothers and sisters in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Kyrgyzstan. While I had made a brief visit to the country almost 10 years earlier – when as a seminary teacher I visited an intern who was my student – this was my first real chance to get acquainted with church life in Kyrgyzstan today. While I admit that my impression is based on limited experience, it certainly seems to me that the Holy Spirit is working through the church's ministers in order to bring help and hope to people in physical and spiritual need.

While I have frequently encountered Lutheran churches which have highly educated ministers but relatively low energy for practical service, what I saw in Bishkek was close to the opposite. This church has a number of very dedicated men and women, some of whom are only beginning their path of deeper theological education. That said, they are not afraid to actually do the work of living the Christian life – sincerely praying, passionately studying the Scriptures, actively finding ways to meet the practical needs of their congregations and of wider society.

My task during this seminar was to focus on the theological underpinnings of our church life in the year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. I explored foundational principles of the Lutheran movement; we began by looking through the lens of Luther's life and moved on into more in-depth discussions of those issues that participants found particularly relevant for their ministry. One area that we focused on was the question of a Lutheran approach to ethics. I noted that the idea that our motivation for doing good is a reaction to God's grace was not something new for them; on the other hand, many found that approaching ethics primarily from the point of view of meeting other's needs – as opposed to pure living through subordination to the commandments – to be rather unfamiliar. Among other things we spoke about Luther's understanding of Law and Gospel, what it means to be simultaneously saint and sinner and how Lutherans have both failed miserably and been faithful disciples when faced with such extremely challenging situations as the period of the Second World War.

During this seminar my colleague was Pastor Tatyana Wagner, whom I knew from my days as a teacher at the Novosaratovka Theological Seminary. After serving as a pastor in Russia, Tatyana continued her education in Germany, where she is currently serving. She was able to speak so that all the participants were able to understand, both in terms of language and in regards to her ability to apply the theology and practice of diaconia to the post-Soviet context. This, I believe, was incredibly helpful for the church as it seeks to apply theoretical and practical aspects of this work to Kyrgyz society. That said, the Church there faces challenges that exceed those in most other countries – the exodus of Russian speakers, the Muslim majority, and the restrictive religious laws might lead others to simply to “keep their heads down” and serve only their own, internal needs. Tatyana and I were continually impressed, however, with the variety of small-but-significant initiatives carried out by pastors and their congregations; we heard from them about their desire to share Christ's love with people, yet this is done without a “hidden agenda,” and their willingness to help does not depend on another's openness to our faith.

I am very thankful to those who helped support this seminar through their financial gifts. I believe that the chance given to the seminar's participants for intellectual stimulation, for encouragement, for fellowship and for listening to the ways the Spirit might be moving among them will be of benefit for the participants, will give additional motivation and order to their efforts to meet their neighbor's needs, and will bear good fruit for the church in the future.



Reformation Anniversary Celebrations

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation provided an opportunity for Lutherans around the world to return to the events of the early 16th century to see what lessons might be learned about theology, church life, and the role of Christians in society. We celebrated the many positive effects of the Reformation and we mourned its unintentional, negative consequences. In the context of the former Soviet Union, it was also a unique time to educate the wider public about who Lutherans are and the historic contributions of our church to the countries in which we live. Church leaders did a wonderful job of making the most of the moment, with regular public events held both in central locations and throughout many far-flung regions of the church.

My contribution to these events was to give a theological talk – something like a paper at an academic conference. Sometimes my goal was to make a bridge between our church and local universities (e.g., in April when I gave a paper on the Lutheran perspective on Russian intellectual life on the eve of the Russian Revolution), but more frequently I was hoping to highlight central aspects of our identity (self-criticism, Luther's catechisms) that help non-Lutherans understand who we are while providing a challenge for members of our church to take up the spirit of reformation today.

Typical for such conferences on a local level was one held in Crimea in September: “Lutherans in Crimea: History and Contemporary Situation.” My paper was called “Reformation: Triumph or Tragedy?” (For those of you who know me personally, you'll have guessed that my answer was “both.”) Attending were students and teachers of the Religious Studies department of the state university, members of local Christian congregations and of Lutheran congregations from throughout Crimea, as well as local government officials. It was a joy to see this wide engagement and to attempt to answer the questions that were raised.

Along with my paper, a few students from the religious studies department also gave theirs; local pastor Sergei Matiukh and the lay preacher from the congregation in Simferopol, Maria Gusarova, spoke about the contribution of Lutherans to the history of their city. Music from the 16th century helped set the tone of the day.



The conferences and ecumenical events held throughout the past year have done much to increase understanding of our church; when understanding increases, fear decreases and this is so important for helping people open up to consider their faith commitments. The challenge for the church now will be to maximize the positive effects of these public events in order to strengthen its ministry of spreading the message Christ's love to our neighbors.

Prayer requests

I would certainly appreciate your prayers for the leaders of the Russia and the West; For Ukraine and the church there, for Kyrgyzstan and its church, and for the new bishop in the Lutheran Church in Georgia, Markus Shock. As usual I would be thankful for your prayers for my wife (Natasha) and boys – Matvey (13), Martin (10) and Lukas (3).

The basics....

I am an ELCA pastor serving through the Evangelical Lutheran Mission of Lower Saxony (ELM) in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia, where I am in charge of an educational program entitled “Equipping for Service.” I maintain relationships with partners (individuals and congregations) in the U.S. and in Germany; if you have any questions for me, please feel free to write to me at: bradnbuerkle@gmail.com. You can read more at my personal blog: russiancorrespondent.blogspot.com or on the site with news articles on the church here: elcrosnews.blogspot.com

