

Good Example

A Meditation for Wednesday, 29 July 2020
St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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Hello, and welcome to this Meditation for a Wednesday Evening in Ordinary Time from St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Franklin, Tennessee.

Today is July 29, the day the church honors four saints. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany and Olaf, King of Norway and Martyr.

Martha and Mary were sisters and friends of Jesus, who play a significant role in the gospels of John and Luke. Their brother Lazarus was raised from death by Jesus, according to John.

Olaf Haraldsson was king of Norway from 1015 – 1028. As part of his campaign to unify the country, he is said by some to have spread Christianity throughout the country and made Christianity the legal religion, although most scholars now doubt that this happened.

The Augsburg Confession, that document which makes Lutherans Lutheran, says this about honoring saints: "...the memory of saints may be set before us, that we may follow their faith and good works, according to our calling...." (AC, XXI).

The confessions make the case that invoking the saints to pray for us is not necessary because the Holy Spirit already intercedes for us, but we remember saints in order to follow their good example.

Lutherans have from the beginning emphasized that the church is the communion of saints, which means that all those baptized followers of Jesus living and dead are saints, made so by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and received by grace in baptism. So sainthood is a status we are given, not one we earn.

Given that the Augsburg Confession encourages us to "set before us the memory of saints" in order that we may come to follow their faith and good works, today, there is another saint I want to consider on this night.

For several days now, our country has remembered and honored John Robert Lewis for his courageous work as a Civil and Human Rights leader and for the integrity with which he served in the US house of representatives for 33 years.

Tonight though, I'd like for us to consider John Lewis as the child of God and as the good example of Christian life that he so clearly was, to look at his faith and good works and be encouraged in the way we are being called today.

If you don't know Lewis' story, there are plenty of good resources out there from the currently streamable-for-free "John Lewis: Get in the Way," from PBS to a brand new documentary film, "John Lewis: Good Trouble," which you can rent from several sources. The web is also full of things to read about this man.

You did not have to listen to Lewis long to see that he stood in the long line of prophets and preachers whose motivation was the call of God to speak up for those of God's beloved who are overlooked and left out in the world. Former U.S. Ambassador and Atlanta mayor Andrew Young said, "The thing that made . . . John Lewis and all of us rise up and claim our freedom was God somehow reached down and claimed us as his children."

Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates said of John Lewis, "If courage had a name, it was his." He was alluding to Lewis' willingness again and again to walk into beatings and arrests and violence for the sake of justice, for the sake of others, and to respond to the violence that met him with non-violence and even love.

Lewis said of the violent system of racism that he protested that, when he was young, he had been overwhelmed by a feeling that "I could no longer be satisfied to go along with an evil system. . . I had to become maladjusted to it, but I [also] had to keep on loving the people who were doing it to me."

More than three decades ago Lewis decided to run for office because he had come to believe that the system could best be changed from within, and that just laws and compassionate government were what God demanded and what God's children needed.

He believed that good and just government could help bring about the beloved community of reconciliation that we children of God have been called to pursue. "I thought, maybe I can be a part of trying to bring people together," he said of his motivation for running for office.

Someone pointed out that when John Lewis got to Washington, his strong belief in righteousness and justice was seen as naiveté, a decidedly negative attribute in Congress.

But Lewis persisted in those beliefs. He was unapologetic and fearless in his stances on behalf of poor and marginalized people. For instance, on the floor of the house, during a debate on a tax cut bill that would also cut safety net programs for poor people, he said, "How can a person of faith vote for a bill that will throw a million more kids into poverty? Where is the compassion?"

Still, he never demonized the people with whom he disagreed, even as he made his disagreement clear.

He said, “I just happen to believe that in every personality there is something good, there is something decent, there is something sacred, and we don’t have a right to go around damaging another personality.”

Many have said that John Lewis was the conscience of the Congress. His integrity brought him respect even from those who were on the other side.

In testimony to that role, on Monday, when his body lay in state in the US Capitol Rotunda, both Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi gave moving and heart-felt tributes to their colleague.

A few years ago I was walking down a hall in the Cannon Congressional Office Building on Capitol Hill with some staffers from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. John Lewis was walking down the same hall, surrounded by a gaggle of people. We talked for a bit about Lutheran Night at the Braves, where, a few months earlier, he had been the Lutherans’ honoured guest at a game.

When John Lewis left, one of the young congressional aides turned to me and said, “There is the only person in this town who can’t be bought.”

I hope that isn’t true. I hope there are others in congress who put the good of the country and all of its people and the good of the world God loves before their own interests, but it says a lot about the integrity of John Lewis.

He was a believer in the values this country has always claimed but not ever fully realized. Still, he remained optimistic, the press has said over and over again. I’d say, not optimistic, but hopeful. Because John Lewis’s optimism came from a strong belief that God will have justice and mercy on earth. It will happen. The world’s people will yet experience reconciliation.

In Second Corinthians, St. Paul reminds us that we are invited to be part of that work: “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;^[a] even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,^[b] we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,^[c] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

I once shared a service at Atlanta’s Redeemer Lutheran Church with Lewis. He gave a talk after the service, in which he told the congregation about the freedom rides and the walk across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma and the non-violent confrontations with a violent system.

When he invited questions, a young boy in the congregation stepped into the aisle and asked Lewis if he was ever afraid when he was being beaten. Lewis walked down the long aisle of that Gothic church, bent down, and showed the boy his head, covered with scars.

Then he said, "I was scared sometimes, but never afraid. When you are doing what is right, what you know God wants you to do, you may be scared, but you won't have to be afraid."

That's why he was hopeful. He was doing what God had called him to do. He was hopeful because God has not given up on building the beloved community, on the work of reconciliation in the world.

When Lewis spoke to young people at university commencement services and the like he always said something like this: "Use whatever resources you have to help make our country and help make our world a better place where no one will be left out or left behind. You can do it and you must do it. . . . That is your calling. That is your mission. That is your moral obligation. That is your mandate."

In one of his sermons, Martin Luther said of saints: "I have previously and often said how the saints should be honoured. That is, you must make a distinction between the saints who are dead and those who are yet living, and what you must do for the saints. You must turn away from the dead and honor the living saints. The living saints are your neighbors, the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, poor people; those who have spouses and children, who suffer shame, who lie in sins. Turn to them and help them. That is where you are to apply your works. There use your tongue that you defend, draw near, advise; cover them with you coat and help them in order to uphold their honor."

Following Luther's advice and serving the neighbors whom the world finds easy to ignore or overlook is the best way we could honor the memory of John Lewis and all those saints who have given themselves away for the sake of the world God loves.

And the example of John Lewis has a lot to offer those of us who would, with integrity and humility and grace, follow Jesus in the work of reconciliation and peace and justice, who would work to encourage the beloved community God intends.

Thank you, John Lewis, child of God, fellow sinner, fellow saint. You are indeed a good example of faith and faithfulness. Thanks be to God for your life and witness.