

How About a New Tradition?

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Originally printed in *The Northern Light*, July/August 2016



OK, “new tradition” is a bit of an oxymoron, but as you read on I think you’ll see my point.

I’m starting with a story I heard, which is not true but it makes a point — a bit like a parable. Here it is:

One Sunday a visitor worshiped at a service of an LCMS congregation. After the service the visitor said to the pastor, “This has been very interesting, and I have a question. Would you be willing to talk with me?” And, of course, the pastor agreed. Here’s how the conversation went:

Visitor: I noticed at the end of the service when you spoke the benediction some of the members sat down and others stayed standing. Can you tell me why?

Pastor: Oh, that. It’s because of our tradition.

Visitor: You mean some of the members think that it’s a good tradition to stand while God’s name is spoken over them in blessing?

Pastor: No! That’s not our tradition.

Visitor: Well then, do you mean that some of the members think it’s a good tradition to sit for the benediction?

Pastor: No! That’s not our tradition either.

Visitor: Well, it seems you’re just fighting for no good reason.

Pastor: Yes! Exactly! THAT’S our tradition!

Ouch.

Don’t get me wrong: we definitely should defend what God clearly teaches in his Word and defend the faith we confess. Often, however, we fight about things that aren’t worth fighting about.

As a confessional church body coming out of the Lutheran Reformation and then subsequent controversies in the church, we have rightly defended doctrine and Bible-based practices over the years. But in our zeal we sometimes have historically — and right up to this day — descended into personal attacks and just plain ugliness.

Galatians 5 lists some of the following as *Works of the Flesh*: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: ... enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, ... and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Unfortunately, I’ve seen a lot of that in the Synod, and I’ve been guilty of it myself. Thanks be to God that we have a Savior who forgives us.

We read further in Galatians, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” On a few occasions I’ve had someone respond to those words by saying something like, “Those things are for sissies.” Or worse. I’ve always responded with, “If they’re so easy that a sissy can do them, tell me, how well do you do them?” I’ve never heard a God-pleasing reply to that.

It IS easy to live in the works of the flesh, and it IS really difficult to live a life that displays the fruit of the Spirit. This is true in Synod conventions, in church meetings, and in everyday life.

That’s because we’re all sinners and we cannot change ourselves. But as the Good News of Jesus settles into us more and more through the Word and Sacraments, then the fruit of the Spirit often does become more evident than the works of the flesh.

Most of you will read this article just a few days before our 2016 Synod convention begins; a few of you will be voting delegates at the convention. At our district conventions I always remind the delegates in my opening statement that in this world we will have disagreements and that it is often OK to disagree. Then I add, “But it is not OK to be disagreeable, and we all know the difference between disagreeing and being disagreeable.”

Please ponder the Scriptures above and please pray that at this Synod convention all disagreements would be notable for a great display of the fruit of the Spirit and all participants would be notable for not being disagreeable.

And that means praying that all delegates — and all of us who watch and ponder convention actions from our churches and homes across the Synod — would keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

That Good News of a Lord and Savior who gave himself for us is the power of God for salvation, and it is the power of God to change us to live more God-pleasing lives now as well. It’s our Savior’s dying love that both forgives us and motivates us to holy living.

It’s that love that compels us to not let church disagreements overpower us, but to answer his call to work zealously in our communities where the Lord’s mission of salvation is unfolding for others.

May God so motivate and change us and even give us a new tradition — at this convention and in all we do.

Thanks for your prayers.

