

Temple Talk – Messiah Lutheran, Lindsborg, Kansas
May 8, 2011 – Third Sunday of Easter (Mother’s Day)
Luke 24:13-35 (Road to Emmaus)

On behalf of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni of Bethany College, thank you for the invitation to be with you today.

Normally, when I have the opportunity to visit a church I spend time talking about Bethany College, who we are, and who our students are. However, given the deep and broad relationship between Bethany and Messiah, you all probably know more about Bethany than I do.

Frequently, I also spend time talking about the connections between Bethany and the church I’m visiting.

I could probably spend the entire service this morning talking about the rich connections that exist, and have existed, between Bethany and Messiah. The alumni, current and former board members, faculty, staff, and students each have strengthened and continue to strengthen our bond.

In the brief time I have this morning, I would rather like to share with you an emerging re-imagining of what it means for Bethany to be a college of the church. This is not yet a complete thought, by no means, but I share it with the hope that it may pique the curiosity of some of you to help me make it a complete thought and eventually a plan.

Let me frame this with today’s Gospel about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. As you will hear later in the Gospel reading, the two disciples have left Jerusalem for Emmaus. Along the way, they meet the resurrected Jesus, though they do not recognize him.

For me, Jerusalem represents the past, what and how it used to be. For example, just 50 years ago, Bethany received 20% of its revenues from the church. The mission and ministry of Bethany and the mission and ministry of the Augustana Church were unquestionably intertwined.

Next, the road to Emmaus represents the future, the path we are traveling, or where we are headed. Last year, Bethany received from congregations, synods, and church-wide about \$200,000. By contrast, that represents less than 2% of Bethany’s total revenues. However, in that same budget, Bethany College awarded slightly more than \$950,000 in scholarships to our Lutheran students.

So as we walk the road to Emmaus, at what point does the hard question get asked, “Are we still a college of the church?”

Let me digress momentarily to explain that tough question in the context of public higher education. That is, a similar conversation is occurring in several states and at those states’ flagship universities. For example, the University of Michigan in 2004 received less than 8% of its total revenues from the state of Michigan. Similarly, last year the University of Colorado received less than 6%. In both states, and others like California and Washington, there are calls to admit the reality these are not public, state-supported universities and should in fact be privatized.

Along the same lines, there are some in the Bethany community who are calling on me to help the Board of Directors admit reality and “secularize.” Or at least admit reality and remove the restrictions that currently exist as a church-related college.

Wow! There’s a heavy question to ponder.

While I hear those calls, I’d prefer instead to lead Bethany and our church partners into a conversation that discerns a new model. I’d like to suggest that Bethany and the church re-imagine our shared mission and ministry. To that end, I’m part of an ELCA task force with six other ELCA college and university presidents who are committed to doing just that.

Put another way, instead of the church just putting a check in the offering plate, which had become the norm, I’d like to see a greater commitment. Please don’t misunderstand me, we appreciate the financial gifts, but there must be more to our shared mission and ministry than money.

As a former church stewardship chair, you may be familiar with the frequently used stewardship metaphor of breakfast. The chicken makes a contribution and the hog makes a commitment. At least as far back as I can see, the church has been the chicken making a contribution, and certainly some very nice contributions.

But what Bethany needs, just like what each congregation needs from its members, is commitment.

Some opportunities for greater commitment that others have shared include

- Bethany and the church partnering in global mission through our companion synods – sending mission teams of alumni, students, faculty, and staff alongside church volunteers or scholarship support for students to study at Bethany from those companion synods.
- Or, we could partner in local mission that might include internships in social ministry organizations for students.
- Or, we could work together to develop our youth – middle school, high school, and college – in missional leadership for a missional church.
- Or, Bethany, with our 24% racial and cultural diversity, could “teach” the ELCA how to move toward a more diverse membership.
- Or, Bethany and the church could seize the opportunity presented by Bethany’s 31% who self-identify as “no preference.”
- Or, Bethany could provide staff and/or chaperone’s for the ELCA’s National Youth Gathering and its 34,000 high school attendees.

The possibilities and opportunities are endless, if we are willing to make a commitment to the future – to getting to Emmaus.

Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we are figuratively on the road most days moving from point A to point B. But frankly in the end I don’t think it’s as important or really matters as much where we were or where we’re going. What is absolutely important for the journey is that we meet Jesus – and recognize him – on the road.

For me, in the context of Bethany College as a college of the church, we are leaving behind the way it was – the church stewarded Bethany – and heading toward the future – Bethany stewards the church. However, only when we meet Jesus on the road to our future will we finally know what that means.

Amen.