

The Rev. Earl H. Meissner
Thursday, October 1, 2020

I wanted to start out by reminding myself about the God that created Earl (and all of us,) and who has journeyed with him since even before Earl was born. It is this God that Earl knew so well that he made his whole life a tribute to the Creator, the Father, the Preacher, the Word, the Lover, the Loved. For we love, because this One first loved us. These aspects of God were the ones that Earl reflected so naturally, so easily – and also the ones that were experienced over and over again - by those who knew Earl the best in this life: his beloved children, his grandchildren and great-grandchildren who called him Opa, his nieces and nephews and extended families of congregants that he served so well over almost 70 years of his 91 walking among us.

It is customary, when a pastor dies, that the bishop of the synod – the pastor of the pastors – sends words of consolation to the family. I am honored to read from two such letters in my remarks today. The first is from one of his pastors who became his bishop, Roger Gustafson.

“To the Loved Ones of the Rev. Earl Meissner: As one who was privileged to serve for several years as Earl’s bishop, I extend to you my deep condolences on the death of this beloved child of God who you knew as father, grandfather, great-grandfather, uncle, friend, mentor. And, in keeping with the faith he shared so generously, I also am most grateful that he now lives fully in the presence of our Lord.

Earl spent his time among us in ways that were obvious, and not so obvious. Since his ordination in 1955 he served four congregations and a chaplaincy – that much is obvious. What is not so easily seen is his impact: in his preaching, teaching, and pastoral care throughout those years he touched countless lives with the good news of God’s never-ending love and acceptance. In those unrecorded acts of service he planted seeds of grace and hope and love that will continue to bear fruit in God’s time and in God’s way.

This gentle man also fully embraced his calling to his family, finding special joy in sharing in so many ways in the lives of his loved ones. There, too, God’s grace became real and life-giving.” *Signed: The Rev. Roger Gustafson, Bishop Emeritus, Central States Synod, ELCA.*

The second, comes from our current Bishop, Susan Candea. “On behalf of the Central States Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I would like to extend my sympathy upon the loss of your loved one, Earl. I would also like to extend my deep appreciation for the life he lived in and through the church, for his many years of ministry, and for all he did to proclaim and live out the gospel. In May of this year, we sent him a certificate in celebration of the 65th anniversary of his ordination.

In the gospel of John, we hear Jesus say, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will take them out of my hand.” There is no doubt that Earl, known and loved by God, did indeed listen to the voice of Christ and follow him. He followed Christ through his many years of ministry...even after his retirement, he wrote in his reports to the bishop each year that he wanted to continue doing ministry for congregations that needed help, AND he wanted to care for his wife, Phyllis. He obviously loved the church and loved his family.” *Signed: The Rev. Susan Candea, Bishop, Central States Synod, ELCA.*

I remember chatting with Earl one day about a particularly difficult text I had just preached on, and he shared how uncomfortable he had felt at being a prophet in the pulpit. He

just wasn't as comfortable with the heck-fire and brimstone pulpit presence as he was with the loving, gentle shepherd. And every one of us knew how well he embodied that role – guiding, caring, prodding (sometimes) but always looking after those in his flock. You know, of course, that the word Pastor is intimately linked with the word Shepherd, and so Pastor Earl led his extraordinary and ever-growing, ever-changing, ever-shifting flocks.

I love to think of all the babies he cradled and baptized, the dying hands he held to drive away the fear, the couples he prepared for marriage and the joy of performing their wedding, and all the sermons he preached with a twinkle in his eye as he wove a story that somehow seemed to fall lightly upon those who had no idea that they would be touched by a God of love on that particular Sunday, in that regular, ordinary worship.

Pastor Earl knew how to tend us - each one in a unique way – and he knew how to bring in the stragglers and make them feel like they'd been there forever. For example - The Meissner Pew – started with Phyllis and Earl needing to sit close to the door for easier access as their mobility became limited. Not satisfied to sit there alone, often a son or granddaughter would slide in beside them. By the time Earl was alone, the whole back pew was filled with family members of every generation. Earl knew how to fill the pews – and we will always pass that particular pew and see him sitting there, right on the end. Closest to the door!

There is a very old tradition in the church, that when the casket is brought into the sanctuary for the funeral service, it rests in front of the altar feet first for a layperson, and head first for a member of the clergy. In this way, the deceased completes their final worship thus: a layperson faces the altar and the cross as they have always done, but a pastor faces the congregation, just as they have always done.

A small symbolic gesture, but one of honor and great respect for the one who brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to God's people week after week, Sunday after Sunday, season after season. There was always something new to say, something different to hear, a deeper understanding to share, a whole new way to see. Ritual worship brings it all, as we will experience in the two actions of this faith community that will happen in just a few moments.

First, we will share the meal, partaking of the bread and wine – participating in a joyful sacrament that is 2,000 years old. This meal is received in the midst of all those who have entered the Church Triumphant before us: the communion of saints. So, Earl will continue to be with us as we participate in the foretaste of the feast that he now enjoys fully with Christ.

Second, we will “commend” Earl to God. Funny word, “commend,” because it really means, “let go and let God.” The fabric of our community has been torn some and needs to be repaired, so we are called to do that mending together with God – “co-mending” as it were – placing patches where needed to make our fabric even stronger. Filling the tears with our tears and our memories and pieces of our hearts that were touched by God through Earl.

The Rev. Earl Meissner died peacefully last Sunday morning. Fitting for a preacher – as Sunday morning - the day of Resurrection - is celebrated on every Sunday morning, no matter what time of year, no matter what the season. For Earl, now it is all Easter, all the time.

Let me conclude with the remainder of Bishop Canda's letter to you all: “And there is no doubt that Earl now enjoys the new life given to him by Christ. As he proclaimed the gospel throughout his life, he now gets to enjoy the abundant blessings of the gospel in all its fullness. For that we also give our thanks and praise to God.

As you gather to say goodbye to this servant of Christ, my prayer is that you will hear the voice of Christ saying to Earl, “*Well done, good and trustworthy servant . . . enter into the joy of your master.*” (Matthew 25:23). Amen. And again I say, Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church
Olathe, Kansas