

Water in the Lutheran Tradition

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It had occurred to me that I could structure my remarks around the facts that water is important to German Lutherans because it is needed for brewing beer; and water is important to Norwegian Lutherans because it is needed for making coffee, and so on. But I don't think that's what Kirsten Shead and Jenny Seifert had in mind when they invited me to speak.

So instead I'll talk about the more central significance of water in the Lutheran tradition in the sacrament of Baptism – without, I hope, getting too deep into the thickets of doctrine and theology. And I'll be speaking out of my own part of the Lutheran tradition, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or ELCA.

Lutheran worship is focused on word and sacrament. The “word” is the good news of God's free and undeserved gift of grace: first of all, in the forgiveness of sins through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; but also in the goodness of the life-sustaining gifts of nature and human community.

Martin Luther's small Catechism (a summary of his understanding of the Christian faith) states: “I believe that God has created me together with all that exists.... God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, family, fields, livestock and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life.... And all this is done out of pure [parental] and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”¹

In this perspective, all that supports and enhances our lives is a manifestation of God's grace and goodness. So there is a “giftedness” to our lives; we don't “have” life, we *receive* life within a web of relationships.²

¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 1162.

² For a classic presentation of creation as a “theater of grace,” by a Lutheran theologian, see: Joseph Sittler, *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*, ed. Stephen Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

In Lutheran theology, God's word comes to us through Scripture, and one powerful biblical statement of the giftedness of life in creation, in which water is a central theme, is Psalm 104, which reads in part:

O Lord my God, you are very great.
 You are clothed with honor and majesty...
 You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
 they flow between the hills,
 giving drink to every wild animal;
 the wild asses quench their thirst.
 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
 they sing among the branches.
 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
 the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work....
 The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
 the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
 In them the birds build their nests;
 the stork has its home in the fir trees. . .
 O Lord, how manifold are your works!
 In wisdom you have made them all;
 the earth is full of your creatures.

(Psalm 104:1, 10-13, 24)

Note that this Psalm speaks not just about water, but portrays the web of ecological relationships that are based on water, and water is seen as good not only for human beings, but for other forms of life as well.

So much for "word;" now, on to "sacrament."

In the Lutheran tradition, there are two sacraments, both of which involve something from the material, natural world: in the case of the Lord's Supper (or Eucharist, or Holy Communion), it is bread and wine; and, in the case of Baptism, it is water.

What is called the "Flood Prayer" in the baptismal service, based on a prayer by Luther, begins: "We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight," and it goes on to

mention other key stories from the Bible that involve water -- Noah and the flood, the parting of the Red Sea, and the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River.³ But note how the beginning of that prayer echoes the themes of water, life, delight, wonder and gratitude that we just heard in Psalm 104.

In Lutheran theology, Baptism is seen as a rebirth into a new life, a life with a purpose and mission that includes caring for God's people and for God's world. When a child is baptized, the parents are charged with the responsibility of teaching and nurturing them in the faith "so that [they] may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace."⁴

So in the Lutheran tradition, as I understand it, baptism looks in two directions. One direction is receptive: appreciation and gratitude for God's gracious gifts – of both new or renewed spiritual life, but also the earthly, material gift of water. The other direction is active: responsibility and care for all that God has made— human individuals, human societies, and the natural world, the whole community of life that is utterly dependent on water.

What does this imply for how local groups like lake associations might work with Lutheran churches or outdoor ministries, public policy advocacy, and so on? I'm not suggesting that lake associations should make theological proclamations about the meaning of Baptism, but they can offer information and activities that can inform the understandings and practices of interested and receptive congregations and clergy.

They can be a resource for a larger understanding and richer appreciation of the grace that comes to us in and through the created world, in the gift of water and in the varied, intricate, and beautiful forms of life that it supports. And they can help guide congregations in responding to that grace by respecting, protecting, and caring for the waters and watersheds within which they live.

At its 2016 Churchwide Assembly the ELCA adopted a resolution that reads in part,

- *"RESOLVED, that the ELCA . . . provide every active rostered leader with resources to locate each congregation within its watershed district, so that waters may be named and known in worship and intercessory prayers, and that theological and biblical themes may build awareness, care and thanksgiving for the gift of these waters; and*

³ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 230.

⁴ *Ibid*, 228.

let it be further

- *RESOLVED, that the ELCA . . . encourages congregations to plan events outside their doors and within their watersheds, utilizing the many biblical themes of renewal and liberation that water affords.* ⁵

There are many ways that congregations could act on this resolution, ways that could benefit greatly from organizations that are focused on the enjoyment and protection of lakes and other water resources.

In connection with the ritual of Baptism itself, one community in Washington State adapted a prayer of thanksgiving at the baptismal font to include their local watershed: “Glory to you for oceans and lakes, rivers and creeks. . . . *Praise to you for Isella Glacier and Railroad Creek, for Lake Chelan and Columbia River.* Your waters are below us, around us, above us; our life is born in you. . . .”⁶

One pastor has suggested, “Perhaps a flow chart of the water system should be placed near every baptismal font.”⁷ And one could also imagine a map of the local watershed providing the wider context of the water system, or a diagram of the hydrological cycle.

More broadly, in terms of living out one’s Baptism in a life of service, congregations have participated in lake festivals and stream clean up projects, provided water conservation education to parishioners, and engaged in advocacy around clean water issues, both in this country – most notably in Flint – and overseas, in relief and development work to provide communities with clean and safe water supplies.⁸

So there are lots of opportunities for connecting the work that lake associations, watershed advocates, and environmental educators do with the Lutheran congregations in their communities, and I hope we’ll have a chance to explore some of those later this afternoon.

⁵ “2016 Churchwide Assembly: Legislative Update, Friday, August 12, 2016,” pp. 11-12. Online at: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.guidebook.com/upload/p8aWh9vqY2iSfM4NcXE63BHJ5PwCQxn7/Jve217pvWYdLe3XWovBRz7keLov87RVlK6Fy.pdf> (accessed April 4, 2017.)

⁶ Quoted in Benjamin Stewart, *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth’s Ecology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011), 53. Includes material from “Thanksgiving at the Font V.,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 71.

⁷ Jeff Wild and Peter Bakken, *Church on Earth: Grounding Your Ministry in a Sense of Place* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 37.

⁸ Resources for and examples of church (especially but not exclusively Lutheran) involvement in water and watershed stewardship can be found at <http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org/water-and-watersheds> (accessed April 4, 2017).