

## Sermon on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Of the ELCA Wittenberg Center

*This sermon was offered by the Rev. Dr. Hanna Kasparick, Director of the Wittenberg Seminary, on May 9, 2009 at the worship service for the 10th Anniversary of the ELCA Wittenberg Center e.V. in the Castle Church in Lutherstadt Wittenberg. This English version was completed by the staff of the ELCA Wittenberg Center e. V. , 2009.*

***And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.*** Colossians 3: 15-16

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, liebe Schwestern und Brüder,

Yes, we all have a reason to sing and to give thanks. We are celebrating a joyous festival: 10 Years of the ELCA Wittenberg Center. And we celebrate this in a joyous time, surrounded by Easter exultation, between the Sundays of Jubilate and Kantate – “rejoice and sing!” – in the midst of a magnificent spring. The delight of the Creation cannot be overlooked or overheard. It is not to be ignored by our eyes or our ears: the sunshine, the smell of the lilacs, the song of the birds. Expectation floats in the air and the deep blue of the sky bursts our narrow limits. (And the best part of this is that it’s true even if it had rained today!)

The Sunday of Rejoicing, which is written above each day of this week, makes us aware: even creation rejoices at the Resurrection of Jesus:

„Let all the world rejoice,  
be rejuvenated and renewed,  
let everything which lives near and far  
put on its green cloak“

( „Alle Welt sich des erfreuet,  
sich verjünet und erneuet;  
alles, was lebt weit und breit,  
leget an sein grünes Kleid“ ; )

was how the lyricist Ernst Christoph Homburg phrased it in his Easter hymn in the 17th century. And in the hymnal of the ELCA we find a similar thought in a contemporary hymn:

“All the fair beauty of earth  
from the death of the winter arising!  
Ev’ry good gift of the year  
now with its master returns.”

The Lord is risen. God creates a new beginning in all the colors of the rainbow. That is reason enough for thanking and singing, as we have already done in this worship service.

Of course, we also have reason to give thanks and sing for the 10 years of the ELCA Center being in Wittenberg. 10 years- that is not a long time, if you compare that to the epochs of church history, to say nothing of ten years in Wittenberg, where we are sooner accustomed to thinking of a 500-year interval. And yet, for a person’s life, 10 years make a difference: a decade, and especially for those people who are connected to the Center. 10 years of the ELCA Wittenberg Center, those are ten years of important experiences:

There are many intensive encounters of quite varied groups: congregations, students, military personnel, tourists. Time and again, these encounters bring individuals the singular,

enriching experience, that I understand myself better, when I see myself through the eyes of the stranger, whether I am at home in the United States or in Wittenberg. Each time you step across a boundary – from within or without -- you open yourself to a wider world. And just through such encounters you get the right to be at home in a strange place.

There are the many volunteers who have supported the Center through their own engagement and who have been engaged in Wittenberg in very different and varied ways. They have shown that the Reformation is not just a one time occurrence of the past, but that the Reformation still sets people in motion today.

There are the colleagues and the directors of the Wittenberg Center. They have become ambassadors, and, indeed, not just in their own tasks, but above and beyond as “Ambassadors of the diverse grace of God“: All this justifies giving thanks. Yes, sing to God with thanks in your hearts.

It is noteworthy, though, that we are commanded to sing and give thanks when we have had the experience that singing and giving thanks either emerge by themselves or not at all. It is noteworthy because presumably most of us share the experience that you can't command thankfulness and, ultimately, singing. If your heart is not in it, singing and gratitude are reduced to empty phrases, to a house of cards that is brought down by the first gust of wind.

In spite of that, the apostle does not shy away from telling us that it is imperative for us to sing and give thanks with our whole heart. Why this command? Do we really need it? And especially on a day like today?

The longer I ponder this, the more I think: The apostle makes this paradoxical challenge in order to make us aware of something important. Something should impress itself in our memory and above all in our approach. If you want to draw attention to something, you need to use a powerful means- even a command where it really doesn't fit .

For all too often misunderstandings arise, when strangers encounter each other, even when people meet each other in congregations and churches. Misunderstandings, which affect being together. This is the theme of our preaching text. It's a question of unity in the congregation, unity in the church, unity in the body of Christ.

The first misunderstanding which occurs again and again is:

Initially, we have to teach and admonish each other. We have to explain, how it is with our tradition, what we have understood from Luther or why we have Lutheran congregations here and yet live with the Reformed believers in one church. Or: why that just doesn't work under any conditions! Initially, we have to explain our perception and, of course, defend it. Perhaps then we can see, where we agree. And when we have determined this, then we see how we can express this agreement. The sequence often goes like this:

Explain and defend yourselves!

Teach and admonish!

Discuss and take a vote!

And when you have achieved all that, you can sing and give thanks! For then unity is close at hand.

And at that point, we are already at the second misunderstanding. It goes: We as churches have to produce the unity of Christianity. That's where we really need to put our efforts. Not just between the major confessions, between the Protestants and the Catholics or between the Orthodox. No, even on a smaller scale, among various Protestant denominations and churches.

It is proper: clearly, we should engage ourselves and do something for the unity of the church. I myself do not wish for former times, when it was not possible for Christians from Eisenach to celebrate Communion here in Wittenberg, because of the criticism, in another region, that there was a false understanding of Communion. I rejoice that today we are together in one church, the Protestant Church of Central Germany. And I rejoice, that here in the Wittenberg Seminary, we prepare vicars from Lutheran, Union and Reformed congregations. Our home has become larger. The treasure which we have inherited, is also larger. And so I rejoice, that we can celebrate together here in the Castle Church completely different worship services again and again: with Christians from America or Denmark or India or Korea.

It is proper that we ought to do something for the unity of the church. But it is a misunderstanding to think that we have to produce this unity. The sequence determines everything. In the beginning, just like the beginning of our preaching text, there is nothing about our doing anything. Instead, in the beginning, there is the blessing; in the beginning, is our being called to the body of Christ; in the beginning, is the experience that the unity is already there; indeed, in singing and giving thanks. That is the point. "Let the word of Christ -- in song, in jubilation, in hymns of praise -- dwell in you." And then explain and discuss and draw up statements. And you will feel: the unity of the church is already leading us. We always come from that place.

When do we notice that? Whenever we sing in diverse languages. Whenever, for example, the colleagues and guests of the ELCA Wittenberg Center support the Castle Church choir. Whenever in a worship service of the English Ministry Program, there is singing and praying. And by the way, it is very good, that we have a spiritual offering for English speaking guests through cooperation between the ELCA and the LCMS here in Wittenberg.

Yes, it remains painful, that there are still these separations among us Christians, particularly at the Table of the Lord. Yes, it remains painful that there is this chasm between churches, between theologians and confessions, which is always a chasm between humans.

And just for this reason it is essential to consider: how good it is that we must not remain silent. How good it is that these words from the Letter to the Colossians remind us: there is an approach that is stronger than separation. There is an approach which allows us to grow beyond ourselves. An approach that overcomes boundaries and allows 'home' to be established more widely: an approach, which always comes to us as a gift, the gift of being one. For this, sing to God with gratitude in your hearts! Amen!