

Perspectives



Of First Importance

ALMOST CERTAINLY, I WOULD NOT EVEN HAVE BEEN THERE, IN THE UNITED States. I probably would not have been invited, and, had I been, I may well not have gone. But here in Africa, when a friend, an African pastor, invited me to go with him to his “crusade” in one of the “high density suburbs” of Harare (the black ghettos under Rhodesian apartheid), it was quite natural for me to agree. For my friend and I know each other not primarily as an anabaptist and a Lutheran, but as Christians. Westerners are regularly surprised at how quickly Africans bring up their Christian faith in conversation. I am surprised to find myself talking with others about Jesus and the Bible much more often and much more naturally than in the United States. It is only one of the many gifts Africa has given me.

So, a few weeks ago, I stood one cold night in an open field with my African friend, laying hands on people and praying with them for healing. At the end of the service, he had invited people to come forward if they desired healing of mind or body or spirit. First there was a trickle, but then they come in scores and in droves, and my friend asked me for help. I thought they might never stop coming. It had the feel of a biblical pageant, and I was profoundly moved.

As so many who journey to Africa, I have learned anew what it means for Christians to keep clear what is “of first importance.” Paul wrote, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor 15:3-5). My friend and I could choose to focus on our differences, of course—about baptism, about the nature of scripture, about a lot of things. But we have not done so. We have talked about Christ’s death and resurrection and being set free from sin and what that means in African and American contexts. When it comes to things “of first importance,” we find ourselves in remarkable agreement.

Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth regularly reminds us of what really matters. Peripheral issues seemed to predominate in the Corinthian congregation: questions about ethics and marriage and food and head coverings and who has which spiritual gifts. Paul does not evade these hard issues. He doesn’t say they do not matter. But he does keep drawing people back to the center: to “Jesus Christ, and him crucified,” to forgiveness, to love, to building up the body, to the unity of

the supper, to resurrection. All kinds of things matter to Paul, but not everything matters equally.

That is what I have learned anew in Africa: all kinds of things matter, but not everything matters equally. Like the church in Corinth, the church today will discuss and disagree about matters related to sexuality and ethics, about doctrine and practice. In our discussions, we will be guided, as was Paul, by the scriptures. What we decide and how we disagree will make considerable difference. But, above all, like Paul, as we talk we must keep our minds on those very few things “of first importance.” It would be silly, of course, to claim that there are no divisions and disagreements among African Christians. All the fights are here, most of them brought along and carefully nurtured by European and American missionaries—some in the past, some still today. Still, more so than we, Africans know that being in Christ sets one apart from the prevailing culture, even while it sets one together with other sisters and brothers who call on the name of Christ.

It is not as though I had not known of the primary importance of first things before Africa. For *satis-est* Lutherans, distinguishing between the center and the periphery should come as second nature. (It doesn’t always, of course; sometimes the body of what is “sufficient” for the unity of the church grows suspiciously large.) But now I know this in a new way. I know that I do not have the luxury of separating myself from my African friend because of our differences, real though they may be. I know that the common witness we bore to Jesus Christ as a white Lutheran and a black anabaptist praying with the multitudes in an African field is more important than our real or potential arguments about infant or believers baptism—even though baptism is hardly a minor issue. I know that we are one in Christ.

The farther we are pushed to the edges of life, the more we must hold fast to the center of the faith. Peripheral issues will always be of interest, but where life is difficult they will take their proper secondary place. For now, Africa lives closer to the edge—which is why, in Africa, I have been brought closer to the center. For that, like Paul, “I give thanks to my God always” for my African brothers and sisters “because of the grace of God that has been given [them] in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:4).

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