



Better than Chicken

When I was a grade-school kid in Detroit, Frankenmuth meant chicken dinners. It still does, apparently, according to the website for this town that calls itself “Michigan’s Little Bavaria.” So, my brother and I were always excited to hear my parents planning one of our, alas, infrequent family trips to this all-you-can-eat mecca.

Though the chicken dinner connection would, no doubt, be a surprise to Wilhelm Löhe, the fact that the colony he planned in Frankenmuth continues to attract seekers would seem appropriate, since his purpose, in part at least, was to provide a Christian community that would prove attractive to the native population. Native Americans, he hoped, would discover “how good and wonderful it is to see Jesus” in these early Lutheran settlers.

The experiment didn’t work—at least not well—but the idea had good biblical roots. God founds Zion, “beautiful in elevation,” as “the joy of all the earth” (Ps 48). Recognizing its beauty and its wonder and its goodness, “Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths’” (Isa 2).

The problem for Löhe’s German colonists may have been that they assumed too easily that Native Americans would come to them. Surely, they erred in thinking that native converts would naturally take on European, even German, habits of church and culture. Therein lies a danger of much of our witness: it is too centripetal, too focused on bringing the outside inside, too church centered.

When Jesus echoes the Zion tradition, however, he addresses this problem—radically! To his followers he says, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid....Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:14–16). In Jesus’ own person, the temple, the presence of God, left its hill and entered the world. In Jesus’ followers, this outward journey continues a millionfold.

One of my student advisees used these words of Jesus to describe her own vocation as a diaconal minister—an appropriate reference for this issue, since it is occasioned by the 150th anniversary of Löhe’s founding of the deaconess house in Neuendettelsau in 1854. “My vocation as a diaconal minister,” wrote Amy Hartman, “arises out of the promises given to me at my baptism, that I am marked with the cross of Christ forever and have been given the Holy Spirit who inspires me to faith. I am free to live in God’s grace, without the expectation of having to do

something or be something to earn God's grace or justify myself. Out of this love, freely given by God, I can live a life of service for and on behalf of my neighbor. Whatever I am doing in God's world is the place of my calling, the place in which I live out the promise given to me at baptism that I am a child of God. It is also the place in which I live out the call to 'let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'"

Not a bad notion of mission! There is no manipulation here, no force or compulsion, no bait and switch, no programs with hidden agendas, no attempt to make anyone "like me"—all of which are incompatible with the gospel; here there is only light, shining from God's people, inviting others simply by its surprising radiance.

A witness based in the Zion tradition (be the church and they will come) could, I suppose, be passive, could assume that folks must come to us, could do nothing to challenge the status quo—but not so for those who recognize, with Jesus, that God's "city" and God's "hill" are remarkably mobile. As Amy Hartman recognized, "Whatever I am doing in God's world is the place of my calling." She will be active in service and thus active in mission, a flashlight on the move rather than a streetlight on a post. In her own words: "As they stand at the intersection of church and world, diaconal ministers bring the needs of the world to the church and the leadership of the church to the world. They call people to live in God's grace and look beyond themselves to the needs of the world. Diaconal ministers equip and walk with all Christians in their baptismal calling to let their lights shine, giving service as Christ commanded, loving their neighbor as they love themselves."*

The notion that we witness best simply by living in the world fully and faithfully as Christians has good biblical warrant. And, as Löhe hoped, it might prove more attractive even than chicken dinners.

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*The quotations are from the endorsement essay of Amy L. Hartman, written for the Minneapolis Area Candidacy Committee, ELCA, Summer 2003; used with her permission.