

Column

It had the air of a funeral. All the emotions were there, most particularly sorrow and loss, and they were raw and real. The occasion was the closing of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Morganton last Sunday afternoon. It was billed as a “Holy Closing.”

I had only been to one closing service before. The earlier one had been in a church of a different denomination, but the emotions were the same. In both, the one officiating skillfully and tenderly reminded those present that **it** is right to mourn, but as Christians we are people of the resurrection, of new beginnings. The church is more than a building: it is people. The blessings received in that place are to be remembered with gratitude, carried out into the world and shared.

The message delivered at both of these closing services needs to be heard by all God’s people, even by those whose churches remain open. Christians are not people in a box, but out in the world and on the move.

With this said, I must tell you this “Holy Closing” service brought forth an avalanche of memories . . . not unlike those that come when a loved one is laid to rest. I was never formally associated with this congregation; nevertheless, its history and that of the church I serve in Blue Ridge are closely intertwined.

Both met in the old city hall before having buildings of their own. More than that, Frank and Flo Henderson, the founding father and mother of the Lutheran congregation, were the first people I met when I came to Blue Ridge in 1987.

As a funny aside, the Lutheran designation was virtually unknown in these parts when Frank and Flo began holding services in their home in 1981. Once a couple stopped and asked a farmer in overalls on the roadside for directions. When they said “Lutheran” he looked blankly and said, “I hear there is a nudist colony up ahead; is that what you are looking for?”

In addition to their church work, the Hendersons ran the red caboose visitors' center in downtown Blue Ridge . . . that is where I first met them. They soon recruited me to staff it one morning a week. In those days, you felt your mission had been accomplished if more than one car pulled in and stopped.

More than that, Frank donated the wood altar cross and candle set he had made for Shepherd of the Hills (which by this time had been replaced) to our fledgling Episcopal group. Later when we were given brass appointments, we passed on the set Frank had made to another Lutheran congregation.

Some years later, when Frank was in Emory Hospital in Atlanta and not doing well, the pastor at the Lutheran Church asked me to look after the Hendersons while he was out of town. I visited twice, once bringing Holy Communion, the other as Frank lay dying. Since his own pastor was out of town, I officiated at his service held at the Lutheran church, which at the time was a converted ranch house.

On another occasion, when the Lutheran congregation was in between pastors, I was asked to celebrate Holy Communion at the end of a women's retreat. The liturgy was slightly different; the message the same.

Going back to the beginning of our Episcopal congregation, the Lutheran pastor at the time was the Rev. Roy Stackpole. Each week he would photocopy our service bulletins using the overplus of the bulletin blanks his congregation used.

Another memory I had while sitting in the pew this past Sunday was of numerous interdenominational services held in that building. Many times I had stood at the pulpit before a full house reading a lesson or delivering a homily.

All of which to say, this closing service was an emotionally charged one. Before I went someone asked, "Why are you going? Isn't it going to be painful?" My answer was, "I'm going to keep faith with my first Blue Ridge friends Frank and Flo and others I have known in this congregation, many of whom have now gone to be with the Lord." What I

did not say, but perhaps should have said was, “I am going to keep faith with my Lord who prayed that His Church might be one.”

O GRACIOUS Father, we humbly beseech thee for thy holy Catholic [universal] Church; that thou wouldst be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of him who died and rose again, and ever liveth to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

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