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HISTORICAL SERIES, 8

One in Christ

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(Editor's Note: The Rev. Stephen P. Kristenson is the second Bishop of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, having begun that ministry in 1994. As is his custom, this sermon was prepared for and made available to congregations of the Synod to be presented there on 21 June 1998, the Sunday on which the biennial Synod Convention was in session.)

**Texts: 1 Kings 19:1-4 (5-7) 8-15a; Psalms 42 and 43;
Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-29**

Dear Friends, I greet you in the name of our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

This weekend your pastor(s) and lay delegate(s) are gathered for the biennial Convention of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories in Calgary [Alberta]. The Synod in convention is gathered this morning for worship, and I am pleased to connect us all together in this way as I share this message with you today.

The theme under which our Convention meets this year is, "In Christ Called to Witness: Being and making Disciples." We who follow Jesus face many challenges as we seek to live out our lives as his disciples, and to pass on the faith in such a way that others become disciples of Jesus, too.

One of these challenges is the fragmentation of our society. On the global stage, we have witnessed the break-up of many great nations into smaller countries, with the divisions created along ethnic lines. Wars have been fought between tribes competing for land and power. The atrocities committed in these conflicts are beyond belief. The widening gap between rich and poor worldwide contributes to the growing isolation between peoples and nations.

Closer to home, we in Canada have prided ourselves on our cultural mosaic, where we have intentionally encouraged people to retain their ethnic identity even as they participate fully in our communal life as a nation. This polite tolerance of one another has created a wonderful environment in which to live and raise our families. At the same time, we are not immune to the fragmentation we see all over the world. We seem to balance on a knife edge as we wonder whether Quebec will remain part of Confederation. Our aboriginal people continue to live on the edge of society, and we seem incapable of resolving long-standing land claims.

Even closer to home, our families and communities are fragmented as we engage in individual pursuits. Our technology contributes to this individualism in ways we have not experienced in the past. Even as the awareness of our world has taken on global perspective through mass communication, it is received in very individualistic ways. Television isolates us from one another even as it connects us with events worldwide. Our computer technology allows us to connect instantly with people around the world, while at the same time inserting a keyboard and monitor between us. We could be communicating with someone a thousand kilometres away or next door and we would not know the difference.

In the 1970s I watched as whole communities in northern Canada changed dramatically as satellite television was introduced. Isolated villages whose primary focus was visiting with one another suddenly became groups of isolated individuals as people glued themselves to the TV. Our society more or less takes TV for granted now, but the statistics on the number of hours that we watch TV are staggering. Even when we watch with someone else, the communication between us is minimal. Our society focusses on the individual. Advertising is aimed at individuals. The huge gambling industry highlights the individual winner, and many contribute to make a few very rich, hoping against hope to be one of those few. Even our team sports highlight individual players.

This extreme individualism contributes to the breakdown of community worldwide and affects our churches as well. The congregations of our Synod often feel disconnected from each other. We know very little about one another, and the fact that most of us are separated by significant physical distances doesn't help. Even parishes that have more than one congregation have a hard time

working together because we are so involved with our own concerns. We know little about the other Christians in our own community.

In the midst of all this, we hear Paul's wonderful words to the Galatians: "... in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." We are one in Christ. While this has been the case for two thousand years, for us in 1998 it comes both as a challenge and a promise.

It is a challenge because of the incredible forces arrayed against community in our world. For Christians to stand together in the face of the pressures which isolate us from one another will require commitment and courage. To turn off the TV and actually engage our family members in conversation is a difficult thing to do. To reach out and visit our neighbour will require modifying our hectic life-styles because this takes time. I often marvel at our ancestors who came to this land 100 years ago. While they were rugged individualists, they also needed each other. When all their energy was put into survival, they still found time to visit, to build churches and schools, to establish nursing homes and hospitals. Today, when a relatively small amount of time is spent ensuring survival, we have become so consumed with leisure-time activities that our lives seem to be a blur of activity, with less and less satisfaction. How do we get off this treadmill of meaningless activity? It is easy to become discouraged as we confront the realities of our world. We try so hard to break down walls between us, to communicate with our children and with our neighbours, to carve out quality time in our busyness.

I have come to appreciate the story of Elijah more all the time as I grow older. Our text from First Kings picks up a piece of a major event in Elijah's ministry as a prophet of the Lord. The people of Israel have abandoned God to follow the gods of the world around them. They are experiencing drought as a result, and Elijah has come to confront the king of Israel and the prophets of Baal whom he and Queen Jezebel support. He arranges a showdown between himself and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. They both erect altars and lay sacrifices upon them. They agree that the one who sends fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice is God in Israel. The prophets of Baal spend the day in a frenzy trying to call down fire from their god. They finally give up, exhausted and bleeding from their efforts. Elijah,

then, dousing his altar with water, calmly calls down fire from heaven which consumes the sacrifice, the altar, and all the water that was collected in trenches around the altar. Then the drought-breaking rain begins to fall, and Elijah runs in triumph to the capital city. Now, however, he faces the wrath of Queen Jezebel who has been quite humiliated and has lost all her prophets.

That is where our story begins today. Elijah is the picture of discouragement and despair. He feels alone, abandoned by God and all the people, even though he has just been a part of a miraculous event which, one would think, would encourage him for years. But God has not abandoned Elijah. God feeds him, encourages him, leads him out into the wilderness and there gently confronts him, reaffirms his calling as a prophet, and sends him back into the world, refreshed and renewed.

God does not abandon us, either. We are not alone in this world, even though it feels like it from time to time. The pressures on our families and on our community may be great. After all, there is an awful lot of money behind television, movies, newspapers, and magazines, and well-educated people are trying to convince you that a product, a life-style, a value system, is just what you need for happiness and fulfilment. We might like to separate ourselves from this world as much as possible, and we long for a place of quiet and peace where we don't have to struggle so much. Yet God loves this world enough to die for it in Christ on the cross. This is the world in which we live, and to which we are sent as followers of Jesus.

We are one in Christ. That is also a promise. Our Gospel text gives us a glimpse of the power of that promise. Jesus has been travelling with his disciples, teaching, healing, restoring the lost to fellowship with God and one another. They have just experienced a storm while crossing the lake that threatened to sink them and take their lives. Jesus stilled that storm, and then walked right into another storm as he confronted the demon in a man in the country of the Gerasenes. This man was the picture of isolation. He lived among the tombs, separated from all of humanity, literally all alone. Jesus drove out the demon and restored the man to the community. The villagers were amazed to find this wild man calm, clothed, in his right mind, and seated at the feet of Jesus.

That is the kind of power we have in our midst. The risen Lord Jesus is still among us, breaking down the walls that isolate us from

one another, creating a community in himself. There is a lot of fear in our world. We cling to what we know. There are a lot of people who are on the fringes of our society, and the easiest way to deal with them is to keep them on the fringes. There is violence around us, even in our families. New immigrants are considered threats to established communities. After all, most of our congregations grew out of a fairly tight-knit ethnic community. Most of us are now much less ethnically oriented, although almost all of us can point to struggles in our past as we came to terms with the changing community in our congregations. It is not easy to work through transitions in our families and communities. Change can be threatening. It is hard to let go, trust God, and look at the world through the eyes of Christ, but that is what we are invited to do.

What will the future hold? That we cannot know in any detail, but the forces that are at work to fragment and divide us are certain to continue as power increases in multinational corporations whose only motive is profit, and as governments show less inclination to care for the poor and powerless among us. While this may worry us, our texts remind us that this world does not have the final say, and that the power of God is still at work among us. God has given us resources through the body of Christ in our own Church that we haven't yet tapped, and we are part of a very large company of witnesses with the Christian Churches worldwide whom we must learn to know and with whom we must join forces as we confront the reality of evil, sin, and death in the world around us. The Holy Spirit continues to call us into unity in Christ.

This is a wonderful time in which to be Christian. We have good news to share with a world filled with bad news. We have the privilege of offering hope in the midst of despair, purpose and meaning in the face of meaninglessness, and life in a world filled with death.

We are one in Christ. Thanks be to God.