Article for the March 2014 Lutheran Witness

Rev. Andrew T. Yeager

Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, Garrett, Indiana

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” The sophomore in High School you’re asking hasn’t a clue and probably won’t know for years what career she will settle on. Though the question leaves her uncertain, she’s learned to tell you what you want to hear, so she says, “Maybe a nurse like my mom, or a veterinarian because I like dogs.”

To young people, it’s obvious they are being prepared for the future. Perhaps what’s less self-evident to youth is that they have an identity *today*. Who are they today? They are baptized. They bear the Name of the Triune God and have received adoption into his own family, the Church. This is not an identity they have to earn or choose for themselves. It’s an identity that’s given - theirs by grace. Christ chose them even while they were spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins and made them his own.

This is a huge comfort, and, it’s a certainty. Youth feel great pressure to prove themselves socially before their peers and academically before their teachers. Later on, they’ll have to prove themselves to college admission officers, future employers, and future spouses. Uncertainty looms: will they measure up? Their present identity as a baptized person in Christ means they have nothing to prove before God. Already, they stand before him justified, set free from the burden of needing to earn God’s grace and favor or win his approval through any action of their own. They are also set free from the need to go on a futile quest to ‘find themselves.’ The question ‘Who am I?’ has already been answered at the Font. Their present identity is a certain identity.

Youth also have a *present* calling. Like their identity, a young person’s calling is neither self-chosen nor earned, but given. They don’t have to plan it or figure it out…it’s theirs already by virtue of their Baptism. Once again, we’re on the solid ground of certainty! What is the calling of a young person? To serve within the places God has put them: family, Church, and State. Set free from the need to prove themselves before God or the need to create an identity for themselves, what’s left for them to do? Take up their cross and serve their neighbor in love. The shape of a young person’s calling is mainly to *submit*, to their parents (1 Peter 5:5-6), to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:5), and to their pastors (Heb. 13:17). The Gospel teaches us that Jesus fulfilled his calling perfectly as a twelve-year-old youth by applying himself as a diligent student of the Law and remaining submissive to Mary and Joseph, even though he was their Lord and God (Luke 2:40-52).

Growing up as a young person in the Church means receiving what is handed down. A youth’s calling as a member of the Church is to submit to the handing-down of the Church’s life of prayer and the Lord’s teaching. The Church isn’t remade in the image of each new generation; it isn’t resized and reshaped to conform to the world’s latest fads or newest idols. The Church is built on what already existed before any of us were born: ‘the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone’ (Eph. 2:20). The Faith is by its very nature something that is tradition-ed, passed-over, and handed-down to each new generation, as St. Paul says to his Corinthian congregation, “I commend you because you maintain the traditions as I delivered them to you” (1 Cor. 11:2).

So the Church’s pastors and teachers encourage youth to attain full adulthood in Christ, what the writer to the Hebrews calls the ‘solid meat’ of maturity in the Faith (Heb. 5:14). To jettison what is handed down in favor of imitating the world’s latest trends, or to adapt the Church’s doctrine and life to fit the modern context would only serve to foster spiritual adolescence. On the other hand, pastors and teachers encourage true spiritual maturity by displaying a lively and faithful use of the liturgy, careful and ongoing instruction in the Scriptures and the Small Catechism, focused pastoral care that utilizes confession and absolution, solid Law-Gospel preaching that clearly proclaims the God who justifies the ungodly apart from works of the Law.

A young person’s calling as a member of the Church is to receive the Faith by submitting to the handing down of the Faith. St. Paul asks, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (I Cor 4:7) Given the choice, the Old Adam would never choose to buckle down and study the Scriptures, put the catechism to memory, learn the Church’s liturgy, or sing the Church’s hymnody. No teenager, and no adult for that matter, has an inherent desire to be catechized, taught the faith. Being a diligent catechumen is not an instantly gratifying pursuit of the flesh. But it is a good and godly pursuit, indeed, the ‘first love’ of the new man in Christ.

So instead of asking youth what they want to be when they grow up, afford them comfort by reminding them *what they already are*: baptized. And, remind them of their present calling. God calls them to be faithful and obedient children, citizens, and members of the Church. Youth fulfill their calling in the Church by heeding the instruction of their pastors and teachers whose aim is for them to hold God’s Word sacred and gladly hear it and learn it.