

March 2024



From the Bishop:

During the cold snap in January, I realized that the hummingbird food had frozen again. I went outside to replace it and noticed a hummingbird just sitting, seemingly frozen, perched on one of the little prongs of the feeder. Now, usually the hummingbirds I feed are fierce. They swirl around my head demanding new syrup and for me to move out of their way. They exert a force that, if bigger, would be scary. But this one did nothing as I moved closer.

I stood there. Not sure what to do. Do I shoo it away? Do I simply hope it moves when I reach out? Do I come back later hoping this bird is still alive?

As in most things we do these days, I decided to research online. According to the website *Science*, hummingbirds may appear “frozen” on a feeder, but they’re using torpor to conserve energy. This article urges one to not disturb them as this is a natural behavior and allows them to save their energy.

With this, I decided to wait until the hummingbird flew off before replacing the feeder with fresh syrup (which happened about a half hour later).

So why tell you this small story of hummingbirds and me? I think there is some overlap between energy and torpor and what this all might mean for us as church together.

While not a perfect analogy, sometimes we can act like hummingbirds swirling and swooping, using lots of energy to do things. Sometimes we think that if we aren’t doing activities, or if other people aren’t doing activities, then we are failing as a church. It reminds me of a pastor saying to me at an event for Rostered Ministers, “Bishop, I feel that I have to attend everything that is planned. But, may I ask, is everything planned necessary?”

Perhaps we use energy up when it is not necessary.

Perhaps, like the hummingbird, we also need a time of torpor. Perhaps we need a “time out” time or a reflection time or a meditative time or just a time to inhale and exhale without worrying about the next event or program or activity. As theologian Richard Rohr puts it when describing centering prayer, “Prayer is simply sitting in silence, open to God’s love and your love for God. This prayer is beyond thoughts, emotions, or sensations.”

Dear Beloveds in Christ, Lent is here. As we plan and attend the meaningful worship and fellowship that we all love during the season of Lent, I pray that in worship and in other ways you can find the space and openness to embrace the wonder of the Spirit.

For we can learn from hummingbirds – not that we are to eat one and a half to three times our body weight every day like a hummingbird – but instead, we are called to have a flow between busyness and stillness, action and reflection, hustling and torpor, acts and prayer.

I pray that as we follow Jesus, as we live in Jesus’ love, as we contemplate his words and actions, we may do the same.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Mark 1:35

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From the VEEP

Borders, boundaries, and belonging. As long as there have been humans, we have grouped ourselves together – in families, tribes, cities, states, nations. We have set boundaries and borders around these groups. Each group sets rules for what constitutes membership and what rights, privileges, and responsibilities come with citizenship. Some groups are expansive and offer membership to just about anyone. Others are more selective and have stringent rules governing who gets to belong and who doesn't. These rules and regulations change and shift over time, as do the borders they enforce.

I am an American citizen and I am a Canadian citizen. Each of these citizenships comes with different rights and responsibilities, and each has different rules that govern them. When I was born (over 60 years ago), I was born an American citizen because I was born in the United States. It didn't matter that one of my parents was Canadian; the United States counts all those born within its borders as citizens. At that time, Canada did not recognize children born to citizens abroad, so I only had single citizenship, which was probably for the best. The U.S. does not look too kindly on dual citizenship as it can lead to split allegiances – what if my two countries went to war? My mother had to renounce her Canadian citizenship when she became a naturalized U.S. citizen sometime after my birth.

These restrictions have eased somewhat, now, which is a good thing for me because in 2009, Canada changed its laws and decided to claim those of us who had been born to Canadian citizens outside the borders of Canada. I didn't have to do anything to earn that citizenship status. On April 17, 2009, I simply woke up Canadian. As far as the Canadian government was concerned, I was now part of the family. My mother's motherland had claimed me. There were actions I had to take to obtain the documents necessary for everyone *else* to recognize my new status, but whether documented or not, I was Canadian.

In the bible (according to a search of Bible Gateway), the term "border" appears 19 times in its context of lands – all in either the Old Testament or the Apocrypha. Similarly, all the instances of the term "boundary" occur in the Old Testament. The New Testament, conversely doesn't talk much about borders and boundaries. Instead, it shares the good news of a God who breaks down barriers and breaks through borders. In Jesus, God breaks down even the divisions between life and death, heaven and earth, divine and mortal. The Kingdom of God is come near! And yet, we humans continue to focus on borders and erect walls and make rules to define who is in and who is out. Too often, we are like the governments who disdain multiple citizenships - forsaking God's expansive both/and for the limitations of either/or. We think we can put borders around even who gets to be part of the Kingdom of God.

The ELCA has been concerned for some time about decreasing membership. Some congregations are closing, some are merging, some are seeking new ways of doing church to try to reverse this trend. Maybe it is time to rethink how we as ELCA congregations define membership. What rights and responsibilities do members have? Who has a voice? Who has a vote? What pledges of allegiance do we require? What barriers are there in our governing documents that prevent people from participating fully in the life of the church? How can we be more expansive in how we define citizenship in our congregations? Must people commit to only one faith community? If they worship, profess their faith, and contribute materially to the mission of the congregation, must they still pledge allegiance to our congregation alone and renounce membership in all other communities of faith?

I'd rather be like Canada and reach out and claim those who may not have been eligible in the past. Rather than wait for people to apply for membership, could we just confer citizenship unilaterally? After all, isn't that what God has done for all of us - reached out and claimed us? We are citizens in the kingdom through God's great grace. Who are we to re-erect the boundaries God has torn asunder?

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