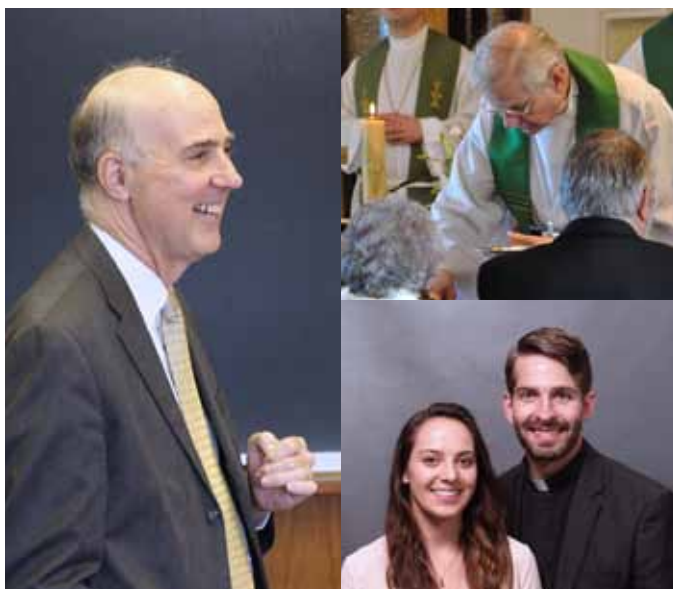


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## For the Life of the World

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# Reaching Into the Secular World

Rev. Chad D. Kendall



**M**arch 16, 2008; it was my first Sunday as pastor at Trinity Lutheran in Lowell, Indiana. I stepped into the chancel for the first time, greeted the saints here, and my first thought was that it was an aging group of congregants. Internally, I was pensive. It was an important beginning, feeding the people of our Lord in this place. All the familiar questions common to a pastor whirled through my mind. I knew what to do: preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, and properly distinguish Law and Gospel. I wanted to reach the lost too! I wanted to talk to people caught in secular humanism's trap.

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Young people started coming to me asking big questions. They weren't asking me about our doctrine of justification. They weren't asking me about Law and Gospel. They weren't even asking about our Lutheran doctrine of the Sacraments. It was more like this: "Don't you think the apostles were power hungry?" "Don't you think St. Paul was a bigot echoing first century cultural opinions?" "Don't you think hierarchies in the Church should be abolished?" "How can you be a part of an institution which has done so much evil in the name of Jesus?" My first couple of years were a struggle to understand what was going through the minds and hearts of the young.

What was helpful for me was my past; I grew up as a cynical atheist. So on many occasions I sat in my study amidst my books and my prayer desk, thinking about the queries of the young. I knew part of the cause for the questions: pain. I knew the world and its evils were slowly emptying these young people. They did not know Scripture. The image of Jesus was marred by secular voices, the sins of others, and, in many respects, their own darkness.

Instead of trying to answer every question, I shifted the conversation. While those questions needed to be addressed at some point, there were more pressing issues. I began to realize that one key thing which has been lost in American religiosity is the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." This article speaks of hope and the present realities afforded by the Second Article of The Apostles' Creed on redemption. I realized that our culture may be favorable toward Jesus but it feels it doesn't need the Church.

My preaching and teaching had to be thoughtful. I had to be intuitive and aware. I needed to listen carefully to them. I came to find that, like myself, those outside the church were not alienated when I would pull out the rich pearls of Scripture embedded in the Hebrew and Greek texts. The depths of these riches in Scripture were drawing them into the deep mysteries of our

Lord...and it brought them joy. Like scales falling from their eyes they were being opened to another existence.

I came to realize that I love these people who are outside of the Church. They are as I once was. I often thought about the words of St. Augustine: "Not that it is a becoming disposition in us to be greedy of the praises of men, but that the things which we minister are of God; and the more we love those to whom we discourse, the more desirous are we that they should be pleased with the matters which are held forth for their salvation..." (*On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, chapter X). This made me think that what I do as a pastor is not to simply change my language because the young are sensitive. We are not simply looking for what may work for a particular generation. What we must do is love those with whom we discourse.

Shifting the conversation, I began to address their loves. What do you love? What do you desire? Love, justice, holiness, goodness—these were some of the responses. The world is "off-the-rails" crazy. The tempo, the speed of information, the level of carnage amidst broken relationships—all contribute to a populous who desire meaningful things. Thinking about the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, how does the Church breathe in this?

I began to focus on holiness. None were able to articulate that they needed the Lutheran doctrine of justification,

but they expressed desires to be holy, to be loved, to be forgiven. They also expressed strong desires that these same attributes be shown to others. The young focus on the need to keep the Second Table of the Law (love your neighbor as yourself), but there is a deficient understanding of the First Table of the Law and the understanding of what it means to love and be loved by God. The penetration of the divine into their lives was largely absent and not understood.

What I came to understand regarding the young in general is that they tend to reject absolute truth claims, even while they desire meaning for their lives. Part of the Lutheran pastor's struggle is understanding this quandary. I have come to the realization that the young secular humanists do not simply want Church to be a weekly social event. Those who inquire want to be permeated by the holy. They want deep and symbolic meaning to waft around them like a sweet and unique fragrance different from the world. They want a Church whose unique aroma settles in the fabric of their clothing. They want a faith to define their lives, to stain everything. They want a piety which makes life-long Lutherans squirm.

The young resonate to certain aspects of the faith, such as the attributes described of Jesus in the Gospels and later applied to the Church in the epistles. For example, Jesus saw the people and had compassion (ἔσπλαγχνίσθη)







on them (Mark 6:34). Similarly, the Heavenly Father has sympathy/mercy (οἰκτιρῶων) (Luke 6:36). Later, St. Paul encourages the church at Philippi: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection (σπλάγχνα) and sympathy (οἰκτιρμοί), complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:1-2). The Greek is striking.

In Matthew 11:30, Jesus describes His yoke as “kind/beneficial” (χρηστός). Ephesians 4:32 contains Paul’s exhortation to the Church: “Be kind to one another,” (γίνεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους χρηστοί.), “tenderhearted” (εὐσπλαγχνοὶ i.e., compassionate), “forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you” (χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς καθὼς καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν). Throughout the Greek New Testament, the things of Jesus are described as the things which characterize the Church.

These attributes of Jesus which come to define the Church in the New Testament resonate with these young, secular humanists who struggle to find faith. When the young converts find themselves resting in the baptismal grace of our Savior, they aren’t merely

receiving information to sanctify the cerebrum. Their lives are new. The mercies of Jesus bring color and beauty to their lives. With it comes the hope that this beauty and color of Jesus Christ will also go out and penetrate the darkness around them. This is important as I continue to reach the lost.

The young in my parish still face challenges, as do I. The young are filled with apprehension and angst because of the unrelenting and pressing secularism all around them. Evil voices still try to dissuade them. But the candles flicker at the Lord’s table, where the Eucharist and the slow rhythm of Christ’s faithful voice offer absolution and hope. They come to the Lord’s sacred table to be embraced by the mercies of Christ because the world without Christ only knows how to tear down and destroy. Jesus forgives, renews, and builds up through His cross—the image of embodied love and mercy, which promises to remain with us in the midst of darkness and the uncertainties of life. They need this; we all need it. 🙏

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