

SERMON: “A New Appreciation for an Unappreciated Gift”

Text: Psalm 148:7a, 12

Rev. Dr. Martha B. Kriebel

Praise the LORD from the earth,

Young men and women alike, old and young together!

My husband and I belong to a car club that just had its Christmas banquet,

which, as in the past, included a gift exchange.

When we place our wrapped gifts on a table, we receive a number.

After the dinner someone calls out a number, the signal for the one who has it, to pick a gift, open it, and, if not liking it, exchange it with someone else.

One person disappointingly whispered to his wife,

“Look what I got, a loaf of bread.”

not knowing it wasn’t just bread, but a loaf from Germany, and traditionally cut and shared with coffee or tea.

I must admit I felt like that man when I received the news that the governing board of Lancaster Seminary was affiliating with Moravian Seminary.

I felt like that man who, when looking into his gift bag, had no appreciation for what was to him just ordinary bread.

I, too, had no appreciation for Lancaster Seminary becoming a part of Moravian Seminary,

and wished, like a gift exchange, it could be passed on to someone else.

That was until a posting on Facebook quoted an article from Dec. 16th that first appeared in a newspaper from Leipzig, Germany.

It introduced Peter Kopp, service director of the Dresden Church choir and now Rector of the Lutheran College for Church Music in Halle, Saxony.

Recently he presented Dresden’s Vocal Christmas concert in which he featured Moravian songs from around the world.

The newspaper included background information that serves as an eye-opening introduction to the history and the mission work of the Moravian Church.

They number around 1.2 million members living all over the world, with parishes that were planted in 40 countries through their mission outreach dating back to the 1700’s and now

clustered into 19 provinces, with representatives meeting every seven years as a unity synod.

They hold the distinction of being the first in the Protestant Reformation, that started as the “Bohemian Brothers” in Bohemia and Moravia.

In 1722, when severely persecuted, Count Zinzendorf took them in as refugees and invited them to build a settlement named Herrnhut, on his property in Upper Lusatia, now in Saxony.

From the beginning it was a faith community that is now an international network from London to Berlin, in Holland, Denmark, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, on Greenland and in the Caribbean.

The distinguishing feature is the title “a singing church,” “song sermons,” and new compositions of Moravian musicians for instruments and voice, with the congregation often singing from memory. (Above information quoted from <https://kulturfreak.de/hernhuter-wiehnacht-das-neue-album-mit-dem-vocal-concert-dresden>)

Peter Kopp looks to 2022 with a musical celebration in Herrnhut to mark the 300th anniversary of the Moravian Church.

which will also be when it is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Now, Peter Kopp sees his Christmas concert filled with Moravian music, as a fitting way to usher in the 300th anniversary of the founding of their church. In anticipation he says,

“The nice thing about a project like this is that you know a lot more afterwards - and not just about the music, but about the time and the world.

“There is always a gain in knowledge. You then also know what you don’t know.” (IBID)

The concert music is marked with a 26-pointed Moravian Star, originating in the 1830’s when it was used in their boys’ school as an exercise in geometry.

Now it appears everywhere, with a light inside that makes them glow as a symbol of the light of Christ shining into all the world.

Like pieces of dried fruit, slivered almonds, raisins, and clusters of marzipan paste liberally mixed in bread dough, baked, and named “Christmas Bread,” commonly called “Stollen.”

When we serve it at home and to guests, it takes us back to this time of year, before Covid restrictions.

To savor the bread brings back memories of city and town squares filled with Christmas markets, of churches glowing with the light of candles, a stay with our family making their home in Germany, and time with dear friends met through a church partnership, and special church days, Kirchentags.

Now, our coming together, joined with the Moravians through Lancaster Seminary is seen as a gift to be savored – like Stollen.

A friend who is a Lutheran pastor, recently told us a story that serves to increase our appreciation for the new relationship which, to me, is a gift to want to keep. (See Wikipedia, Moravian Slaves, and footnotes)

The story goes, that when St. Thomas Islands were claimed by the Danes, who were Lutherans, they welcomed two Moravian brothers who arrived in St. Thomas on Dec. 13, 1732

with one requirement: not to associate or preach to the islanders, since they were whites among black slaves.

Their response was, “We will live as slaves among slaves.” so they could preach Christ to them.

When returning to Germany in 1734, other Moravian missionaries continued the work, establishing churches on St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John’s, Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados, and St. Kitts, and baptized 13,000 converts before any other missionaries arrived.

The Moravian Church all through the Caribbean is evident when seeing their faces in today’s student body of Moravian College and Seminary,

and singing in the school’s concerts, bringing their music into the old Moravian chants and chorales.

A thrill is to attend one of the Christmas Vespers in Bethlehem’s Central Church and, while holding a lighted beeswax candle with its traditional red bow, experience a child in the balcony singing out, and the congregation repeating, “Morning Star,” ending with the spine-chilling last lines:

“Jesus, mine, in me shine ... Fill my soul* with Light Divine.”
(*To which I add, “And the world with Light Divine.”)

That, alone, is reason enough to keep the gift!

Thanks be to God! AMEN!

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First Sunday after Christmas,
Last Sunday of the Year
December 26, 2021

St Paul’s United Church of Christ,
Pottstown, PA 19464

Rev. Dr. Martha B. Kriebel, Supply Pastor