

A Coram Deo Moment

The Rev. Steven K. Gjerde

I drive down busy city streets, suburban nirvana giving way to a commercial paradise before breaking into older, rundown neighborhoods and then cement-and-limestone office buildings.

Downtown Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Not the kind of place for which someone would pine or long, I don't think, except for those who might call it home. A strange assembly of humanity scurries along the sidewalks, businessmen in wool coats, young women in high boots, old, haggard-looking men tripping along parks, poor men and women looking for what only they know, a mass of pedestrians in stocking caps and puffy winter jackets at the bus stop. Traffic races through this emptying downtown as if to flee, its lights and noise a cacophony of the "gotta-get-home-get-outta-my-way symphony" . . . and in the midst it all, a crumbly sort of parking lot filling up with cars.

A church parking lot. An old church, spires scraping the skies—a well-tended house of worship, but not the modern and comfy tents of cement block and carpeting, with their padded pews and solicitous, anxious hosts. It's a grand, imposing sanctuary with a high and solid altar of white stone, stark in the blue-light of coming night, a statue of Jesus gazing down at you with outstretched arms as Sts. Peter and Paul adore him on either side. A pulpit towers above the tallest, its intricate canopy piercing the air, and every surface about the place is hard and gleaming—a sanctuary, in short, that breaks all the modern rules, brooking no humility before men but bidding men to humble themselves before God.

It's a sanctuary that speaks the church's language, and dares to suggest that mankind can announce the counsels of its Maker.

And tonight, this sanctuary is full.

Crowded, even.

A corps of widows (beloved among the faithful) sits near the front . . . families scatter themselves among the pews . . . aging scions of "old families," well-heeled, retire to a transept and look lofty . . . visitors in worn, garish clothing crowd into my pew and gawk (not at me) . . . Ph.D. professors and mentally-disabled alike sit in shared expectation, and a choir of children look (but perhaps only look!) innocent in the balcony.

Why are they here, in this sanctuary that doesn't fit?

Why have they crowded a crumbly parking lot with their cars, swimming against traffic's stream, on a cold night, with barely enough time to gather a morsel to eat,

and slid their haunches together in an old church dwarfed by downtown's commerce?

They have come to sing.

And only to sing.

For a full hour and a half we sang at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, and listened as men and children sang, and pondered the pastor's intermittent commentary. That's all we did.

And it was enough.

Enough to draw us out of our comfortable abodes. Enough to brave the traffic and eat quickly. Enough, for some, because they love music . . . but mostly, I think, because it was a moment to be our true selves, what St. Paul calls his "inmost being"—that is, it was a time to be *coram Deo*.

As children sang old chorales, elderly lips mouthed along silently. The room was still that entire evening, heads barely turned, all sat oriented as if God were holding audience—and, of course, He was, because God is a gracious God, permitting us to praise Him and welcoming even the fluty voices of our children and the cracked lips of our elderly in His worship. He looks upon us, not as the stumbling, crumbling mass of humanity that we are, but in light of His beloved Son, whom He has handed over to us for our justification. He looks upon us through the lens of that One's death, discounting our error, and loving us for His own sake, and in the song of that evening, the *devotion* of that night, we stepped out of ourselves, and

stepped into that love.

I share this with you, I guess, because it is worth sharing. I wish that evening could have lasted forever, and I look forward to the Day when it will. But I share it also because those people who traveled, upstream, just to sing, comfort us in our journey, and set an example for us as we travel our path. They encourage us to *opt out*, to be truly counter-cultural, pressing against the currents to hold fast to those things wherein the Lord holds fast to us. Devotion includes sacrifice, a sacrifice that comforts, and that springs from the promise that there is more to this life lived before men: there is life lived *coram Deo*.

■ SKG

Published with permission from 'A Coram Deo' Magazine, November 2012

