

THEY ALL THINK THAT I AM NORWEGIAN

A colleague shared with me her experience after speaking at a semiannual meeting of the women's organizations of about a dozen affiliated congregations. After her address most of the women headed out of the sanctuary toward the hospitality room for a luncheon. One participant, whom the speaker judged to be a woman in her late 70's or early 80's, lingered. As the speaker retrieved her presentation materials, this elder member of the host congregation came up to her and in a hushed voice whispered,

“Thank you for saying that.”

“Saying what?” inquired the speaker.

“For mentioning in your presentation that you are not Norwegian,” replied the hushed voice.

“Well, it is true,” responded the speaker with a tone of self-confidence. “I am not Norwegian at all.”

The woman, rather wide eyed, looked from side to side obviously surveying to see if any others were listening. Then, leaning in closer to the speaker, spoke even softer, “I am not either. My husband, who has been dead for almost twenty years, was Norwegian. I am not.” Then a short dramatic pause, a shifting glance of the eyes around the room, and with an even more seriously hushed voice, “But they all think I am.”

Most people, hearing this true story, chuckle. Yet, how sad. How sad that a

woman, long standing member of the congregation, lives in the fear of being rejected if people find out that she does not share their ethnic origins. How sad for anyone to have to depend on marriage for acceptance into an expression of the family of God. This congregation replaced building relationships based on understanding, appreciating differences, and respect, with ethnic assumptions. They live in a survival mode and are governed by unhealthy expectations codified into rules protecting their way of being, unhealthy as it is.