

The Rich Divorcee, the Bishop, and the Stolen Candlesticks

by Pastor Kermit Rye
c. 2004

In every community, there is at least one person who knows the history of the town. During the time I served as Immanuel's pastor (1963-1971), that person was D. May Miller. D. May was a lifelong resident of Elk Point and for many years served as music teacher in the school system. She was the daughter of an attorney and had been a member of the local Episcopal congregation. She lived in her own home across the street from the parsonage until she was 103 years old. She then moved to a nursing home in Centerville and lived to the age of 105. D. May was approaching 100 when she related to me this history of the brass candlesticks on the altar of Immanuel Lutheran Church. Her eyesight and hearing had deteriorated, but her mind was as sharp as ever.

The story begins with a major fire in Elk Point around the turn of the century, 1900. The high school chorus was using St. Andrew's Episcopal Church for their rehearsals. Candelabra suspended from the ceiling provided lighting for the group. After rehearsal one evening, not all of the lights had been extinguished, and that night, the chapel burned to the ground.

Since the Episcopal congregation was comparatively small, it faced a daunting task in replacing its place of worship. The decision was made to solicit gifts from people in the community. One of St. Andrew's members was out soliciting when he came upon a home that already had a guest – a Mrs. Zinn from New York State. Mrs. Zinn became curious about the visitor and began asking questions. It was explained that the Episcopalian chapel had been destroyed by fire and they were trying to raise money to replace it. "Put your notepad away," said Mrs. Zinn. "I'll see to it that you get your church."

Mrs. Zinn, as it happened, was in Elk Point to get a divorce. She wanted to take advantage of South Dakota's lenient divorce laws of the time, but a person had to be a resident for at least six months before a divorce could be granted. So she was temporarily living in Elk Point to establish the needed residency. Then, she would be able to end her marriage to Mr. Zinn and wed her next husband – William DuPont, a member of the famous DuPont family.

The Episcopal congregation wasted no time in taking up her offer. A contractor was hired and a design chosen to build a "15th century English-style Gothic" structure. The new church building was to be larger than the old chapel. The carpenters were putting shingles on the roof when the Episcopal Bishop from Yankton stopped by. "*Where did you get the money to build a church like this?*" he asked. They proudly explained that a Mrs. Zinn from New York was financing the project. "*Who is she?*" he wanted to know. The more questions he raised, the more complicated it became. "*We can't accept a church paid for by a person who is living here under these circumstances,*" he finally said. The building was nearly finished, and now it seemed the congregation wouldn't be able to use it!

Details at this point are a bit sketchy, but the end result was that Mrs. Zinn sent back East for a couple high-powered lawyers. After much discussion and negotiation, a solution was found.

Mrs. Zinn's daughter, Mary Rogers Zinn, had died as an adolescent. There was some money that had belonged to Mary. If that money were used to pay for the construction of the church, it would be acceptable to the Bishop. So the work progressed, and the structure was finally completed. A large bronze plaque with the words "Given in Loving Memory of Mary Rogers Zinn" was placed in the front of the church right above the altar. The church was provided with some attractive chancel furnishings – an impressive lectern with the figure of an eagle, a large cross, and the two bronze candlesticks. The congregation was then renamed "Our Savior Episcopal Church."

A few years later, in 1913, a group of Lutherans formed a congregation calling themselves the Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church of Elk Point. Not having a permanent home of their own, they were permitted to use the Episcopal Church building on certain Sundays. Meetings were often held in the afternoon and evening. The Lutherans also used the Florence Theater for a while, and when the congregation kept growing in numbers, they purchased lots across from the Union County Courthouse in the spring of 1915. A roofed basement was built with plans to erect a super-structure at some later date. Immanuel continued at this location for about seven years.

During the same period of time, Our Savior Episcopal congregation dwindled in size, and the building was no longer being used. Some windows were broken out, and birds inhabited the building. According to D. May Miller, "The church was a mess inside!" In the summer of 1922, Immanuel negotiated the purchase of the church building. It was their understanding that they were purchasing both the building and its contents. The Episcopal Bishop from Yankton had a different impression. Without asking, he came one day and loaded the lectern and the candlesticks in his vehicle. Members of Immanuel Lutheran were not pleased. They sent the Union County Sheriff after the Bishop to recover what they believed was "stolen property."

The Lutherans continued to use the building as their place of worship. But the large bronze plaque proclaiming the name of Mary Rogers Zinn was still in a place of prominence above the altar. The pastor at that time was the Rev. Walter Aamoeth. He chafed under the fact that each Sunday as he faced the altar, that plaque was always in his line of vision. He recommended to the church council that they remove the plaque from above the altar and attach it somewhere else, maybe near the entrance. The plaque was removed, but no one ever got around to putting it up again.

Immanuel Lutheran is now in its new church building. I recently attended a service there. As I sat in the pew, I noticed the two bronze candlesticks on the altar, and I remembered the story told to me by D. May Miller many years ago.