

November 5, 2023
All Saints Sunday/Emmanuel 125th Anniversary Celebration
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Mrs. Nils August Peterson

It will probably come as no surprise to any of you to learn that I have spent a lot of time in the past year and especially in the past month and past week steeping myself in Emmanuel's history.

With others on Emmanuel's 125th anniversary team I have been learning about the history of this congregation. I have been pouring over Pastor Kask's history of Emmanuel which was written for Emmanuel's 100th anniversary, celebrated in 1998. Pastor Kask's history was a great resource for our learning about Emmanuel as we moved toward celebrating our 125th year as a community of faith.

As part of our Anniversary celebration this year some people joined me on a community walk to Emmanuel's first church building on Cedar Street earlier this fall. While we were on that walk, we stopped outside numbers 8 and 12 Cedar Street, which are the homes that were built by two brothers, John Peterson and Nils August Peterson, immigrants from the Aland Islands. It was in Nils' home, 12 Cedar Street, that the nineteen people who would become Emmanuel's charter members met, on April 2, 1898, with the plan to start a Lutheran church in Norwood.

Less than 10 days later, by April 11, 1898, the paperwork had been done and Emmanuel had started. A little over a year after the congregation was incorporated, on April 30, 1899, the new congregation dedicated their first building, the church on Cedar Street that was to be Emmanuel's home for 39 years.

As I've been reading about the deeds of those first members of Emmanuel, about their acts of faith in starting a church, buying property, building a building, worshiping, teaching, singing, and within five years, hiring the congregation's first

resident pastor, Pastor Elof Peterson, I've been wondering less about what they did, because that is pretty well documented than about who they were.

Who were those people who started Emmanuel and all of the people who came after them at Emmanuel, those we, though most of us are not biologically related to them rightly call our mothers and fathers in faith.

Because whoever they were, blessed, blessed are they.

I've wondered about all of them, but mostly, I've been wondering about one of them, and her name is...Mrs. Nils August Peterson.

When I was helping my mother move out of her house, the house she and my father had lived in for 46 years, the house that my sister and I grew up in, the house that was Grandma and Grandpa's house for most of our children's lives, as we were going through basement and attic, bookshelves and cabinets, wondering what to keep and what to give away, what was a treasured family heirloom and what was rummage sale material, my mom said something that shook me to my core. As she held in her hand her college yearbook she said, "Why keep this stuff? You know, studies show that in three generations you'll be forgotten anyway."

"Wow! Cheery thought. Thanks for that, Mom."

But when I think about what I know about my own great-grandparents, I find that it's true in my own life. I know four of my great-grandparents' names and a couple of vignettes of their lives, but I don't really remember them. As far as I know all but one of them was dead before I was born and the one, I was alive to know, Leah Billingsley Morgan, who I called Nana died when I was in kindergarten and when my sister, Morgan, was a baby. I have only the dimmest memories of my Nana as an actual person.

Will my children remember those scant stories that I tell them about my Nana? Will they know who that person is in that picture? Will I ever get that picture into a scrapbook? Maybe. Maybe not.

I am the third generation, and mostly what I know is her name. What will the fourth generation remember?

I consider Mrs. Nils August Peterson to be a great-great-grandmother in faith to me, but I don't even know her first name. If anyone does know it, please share it at the luncheon*.

I think of that organizational meeting of Swedish Lutherans in Norwood that was held at her home. I imagine how she prepared to have those 17 people and a pastor from Boston as her guests, making coffee, tea, cookies, making sure that there was a place for everyone to sit, making sure that there was something for the kids to do, for it's possible that Mr. and Mrs. Matthias Johnson brought their children, as the history lists their "family" as people who attended that organizational meeting on April 2nd.

I wonder if Mrs. Nils August Peterson was involved in the plans for the new congregation, or if she and the other women remained silent, as women were so often required to do in church planning gatherings for so much of the worldwide church's history.

Regardless of whether or not she and the other women who were there, so few of whom have their first names listed in the history of the church, were part of the planning, we know that they along with their husbands, and probably their children, were part of the doing.

Within just years of its founding Emmanuel had a Sunday School, a Confirmation class, a choir, a string ensemble, and a sick benefit society to help members in crisis. All of that established before Emmanuel had even hired its first pastor. Within 10 years of its founding, Emmanuel's 19 founding members had become 165 members and 76 children. That doesn't happen without people giving generously of their time, with an "all hands-on" deck attitude.

We don't know the names of all of the people who did the work to make that happen, who prayed, who showed up, who worshiped, who took care of the

building and grounds, who taught Sunday School, who gave generously, who sang in the choir, who played in the string ensemble, who made food and shared it.

Mrs. Nils August Peterson was one of those people. I know that she was, because on the 20th anniversary of Emmanuel she appears in a picture of the surviving founding members of Emmanuel, sitting there next to her husband, with her name, Mrs. Nils August Peterson, listed under her picture.

She was one of Emmanuel's faithful workers for at least 20 years. She was one among many men and women whose names are lost to history.

And blessed is she. Blessed are they.

Church anniversaries make me nervous. I came to Emmanuel right after the church I had served for twelve and half years, Prince of Peace in Brookfield, Connecticut finished a year of celebration of its fiftieth anniversary.

We had done many things in that year to share Prince of Peace's history and story. We had made a banner, our choir director, Kevin Fay, wrote a beautiful call to worship for our worship services. We had a theme "Celebrating the Past, Embracing the Future". We had marched in our town's Memorial Day parade with a float that we made. We had planted 50 daffodils in front of our church. We had raised money to replace our roof. And to top it all off, we had had a big celebratory worship service and luncheon. Sound familiar?

The Bishop of the New England Synod attended and preached at that celebratory service. Former pastors were there. With a church only 50 years old, many of our charter members were still alive and many of them came to the service.

A committee of people worked for over a year and a half to make the anniversary year a special one for our congregation, a year of looking back and looking forward.

But guess what? When the culminating day of our celebration arrived, after the worship service the children of Prince of Peace's founding pastor, who had died ten years earlier, when we were celebrating our 40th anniversary, came and told me

that they were furious that their father had not been mentioned in the worship service.

They stewed about it for the rest of the day, cornering me at the end of luncheon to yell at me again, that their father had not been honored more at the celebration. They told me, “Without him, this church would not even exist.”

A few days later they came to the church to speak to me again, telling me that if I didn’t hang a picture of their father up at the church, they would make trouble for me with the people in the church, the people who loved and honored and remembered their father.

These people, full grown adults, were not members of Prince of Peace. I met them for the first time at the anniversary celebration.

Of course, by that time I was already called to Emmanuel. I was leaving Prince of Peace two weeks from then. So, their threats meant little to me and I’m pretty sure that they came to nothing. I never heard about a big conflict at Prince of Peace over a pastor’s picture.

But that story is an example of the problem with church anniversaries. Sometimes when celebrating a church’s anniversary we get so wrapped up in the history, in the past, in the human effort, in the heavy lift of making a church thrive, that we forget that it is not we, not our mothers or fathers, not the founders, not our pastors, not brilliant and talented church musicians, not any human being who makes a church live, grow, and thrive. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.

And blessed, blessed are we to be used by the Spirit, to be part of a community called into being by the Spirit, blessed by the Spirit, gifted by the Spirit. Called together by the Spirit in our time and in our place, to sing, to pray, to serve, to tend, to cook and eat, to laugh, to cry, to comfort and be comforted, to share, to teach, to learn, to wonder, to grow, and to worship Jesus, the church’s one foundation.

And someday, a long time from now, when Emmanuel is celebrating its next anniversary or the one after that, our names might not appear in the church history from that time. Our faces might be in a picture that no one looks at, or if people do look at the picture, no one might know it's us.

We might be like Mrs. Nils August Peterson, and no one might remember the name spoken over us in our baptisms.

But still, blessed, blessed are we. Because the saints we remember today, the saints of church history, the saints of Emmanuel, the saints we hold close to our hearts, the saints who have been forgotten by history, are not saints because of what they did, first and foremost, they are saints because of who they were, beloved children of God.

And our blessedness does not come from our accomplishments. It does not come from the way that we are celebrated by the world. It does not come because our names are remembered or spoken.

It comes because we are held in God's love. We are held in God's power. We are held in God's mercy. We are remembered by God. We are the saints of God through our life in Jesus, always and forever. And blessed. Blessed are we. Amen.

*We learned at the luncheon that the anglicized version of Mrs. Nils August Peterson's maiden name was Susanna Christine Anderson.