

October 29, 2017
Reformation 500
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36
– Free!
Christ the King Lutheran Church
The Rev. Dorothy Cottingham

Fellow Minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ,
Grace to you and peace from the God of Jacob, our stronghold.

The 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation is a HUGE deal! It is a daunting task to find words of inspiration and wisdom to mark this date. What can we say that has not already been said?

Today I'm going to lean on some people who are a lot smarter than I am. Bishops of the ELCA, professors and scholars, NPR and even Pope Francis. And, of course, the Lord of hosts who is with us; the God of Jacob who is our refuge.

Presiding ELCA Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton asks, "What is "Lutheran"? That seems like a reasonable place to start. What does it mean when we say we are Lutheran? Her article in the October issue of *Living Lutheran* points out something that has puzzled me every day of my as a gestational Lutheran. What's with the ethnic characterizations of Lutheranism? Does anyone know how many branches of Lutheran there are in the United States?

In addition to the ELCA, there are Wisconsin Evangelical Lutherans, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Moravian Lutherans, American Association of Lutherans, Lutheran Ministerium, Lutheran Church in Mission, North American Lutherans and numerous small enclaves that are not affiliated with the major bodies. That's a lot of Lutherans holding fast to their regional and ethnic identity. Germans, Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Moravians, Dutch, all Northern European, white, Germanic and loyal to "our heritage". There was a movement in the 1980s to shed our denominational markers. In an effort to appear more attractive to the uninitiated, Lutheran churches across North America began changing their names.

St. Paul Lutheran Church became known as The Church of Jesus at the Corner Store. Pretty progressive! The goal of attracting the denominationally averse and busloads of "seekers", however, never materialized. In our misguided attempt to become more attractive, Bishop Eaton suggests, we became generic. Lutherans are Lutherans. What we believe and who we are in the world matters. But who are we and what do we believe? Take a moment to complete this sentence?: Lutherans believe _____.

I miss Garrison Keillor and his amusing depiction of Lutherans. He is able to capture the essence of mid-west Lutherans pretty accurately. But his amusing stories fall short of a universal depiction of Lutheranism. They are only part of our story. here are millions of Lutherans in Africa, Australia and Arabia who have been Lutherans for generations. The Lutheran Church has seen its greatest growth in Central and Latin America and Africa. There are more Lutherans in Indonesia than there are in the ELCA. There are more Lutherans in Ethiopia and Tanzania than there are total Lutherans, in all the Lutheran Synods of the United States. There are Lutherans in El Salvador and Japan, India and Mexico, Palestine and Jordan, China and Ireland. The newest Lutheran church is being formed in the world's newest country, South Sudan, according to Bishop Eaton.

It is doubtful that green Jell-O and casseroles will appear at their potlucks. Our ethnic heritage and food do not define us as Lutherans in the 21st century. So, what does?

Could it be our particular way of understanding the Jesus story?

Could it be our understanding that we live in God's history, not our own heritage?

The hymn we sang as our gospel acclamation, written by Nicolai Grundtvig in 1817 and set to Luther's famous tune proclaims our true heritage:

*God's Word is our great heritage
And shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be our chief endeavor.*

https://hymnary.org/text/gods_word_is_our_great_heritage

This is our heritage, God's word! Not what country we came from, not how long we've been a Lutheran, not how long we've been members of Christ the King. We are Evangelical Lutherans. That means we tell the biblical story of how God redeems us from sin, death and the devil. We tell the biblical story of God setting us free from our bondage to sin, liberating us to serve God by serving our neighbor. Being a Lutheran is NOT about our good works. Being a Lutheran is about God reaching out to us in mercy and love.

I know, it's fun to tell the stories of our ancestry. My parents were raised in St. Paul, MN, the heart of Luther-land, if you're Missouri Synod Lutheran. Many of you have deep roots in the upper-Mid-West, where ancestors immigrated from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden.

But what does Lutheranism look like on the 32nd of October, 2017, Bishop Eaton asks. What do we do now that we have marked the 500th Anniversary of this epic event in human history? We cannot, we must not put away the banners, the movies, the books, the joy and move on in the same way we always have. This is a moment of liberation for the Protestant church and for us as Lutheran Protestors! Bishop Eaton calls this the moment of "Liberation in Christ through faith". Freed from defending ourselves as Lutherans to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. It was this liberation that transformed Martin Luther.

Pope Francis, speaking in Lund Sweden last year, in Spanish, at the Lutheran World Federation's inaugural Reformation event cuts to the theological core of Luther's transformation. It is at the core of our Lutheran theology: *"The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that apart from God we can do nothing. Luther reminds us that God always takes the initiative"*. (Christian Century, March 15, 2017, page 25)

Luther wrote about his new-found freedom in Christ in his treatise "The Freedom of a Christian." It is a short, accessible work in which Luther makes the case that liberation in the name of Jesus Christ is both freedom FROM and freedom FOR. Very Lutheran: a both/and proposition.

In spite of my husband's suggestion, I'm going to throw in a little of that "Bible jibberish".

From what are we free? For what are we free? We are free from the bondage of sin and self-reliance. We are free for service to the vulnerable, the poor, the blind, the oppressed. All those people Jesus said he had come to serve according to Luke 4.

We are free to hear the truth in and from the Word of God. Jesus, the Word made flesh promises:

"if you continue in my word, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." (John 8:

Martin Luther faced a church in which the leaders were enslaved by their interpretations of scripture and their adherence to tradition. Has our adherence to "our heritage" enslaved us to a certain ethnic purity, blinding us to God's grace poured out for all of creation?

God's word, our great heritage sets us free from the sin of exclusivity. God's incarnate Word, Jesus Christ greets us at the table where we receive his body and blood, evidence of God's ever-present and everlasting love for us. The covenant written on our hearts is a constant reminder that the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold. We happen to be Lutherans who believe that it is only by the grace of God that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, not our works, not our striving. Only by the grace of God!

Thanks be to God!