

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 27, 2019 (Reformation Sunday)

Ah, Reformation Sunday! Time to celebrate everything Lutheran. Let's bring out the red vestments and paraments. Fire up the choir. Sing the fight song (A Mighty Fortress), and the Reformation scripture texts! All of our favorites...all speaking our Lutheran language. Jeremiah 31? The law will be written directly on our hearts - no need for intermediaries - we're Lutherans, we bypass all that static and go directly to God. Romans 3? We're justified by faith...we don't get bogged down by works. (In fact, there was once a Gnesio Lutheran who had inscribed on his tomb stone, "Never did a good work in my life.") John 8, the usual gospel for this day? We're Lutherans...we know the truth and we are not so sure ANYONE else does. And for one, glorious Sunday each year we revel, we splash, we EXALT in our Lutheran-NESS.

And after 500 years, even the Catholics are starting to come around. A few years ago, we agreed to a Joint Declaration on Justification. At the last Church-wide assembly before this one, a joint document called Declaration on the Way, detailing ALL the things Lutherans and Catholics AGREE on, was approved nearly unanimously. Afterwards, a Roman Catholic Bishop, who was there REPRESENTING the Roman Catholic Church, received as a gift one of the chalices that had been USED for daily communion services at the Assembly. With tears in his eyes, he said, "One day soon, brothers and sisters, we will drink from this chalice together!" He received a prolonged standing ovation. And just TWO years ago, the POPE HIMSELF participated in a joint commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It's a good time to be Lutheran.

One pastor (Rev. Rhonda Hlavinka at Salem English Lutheran, Mpls Area Synod) put it this way:

- If you have ever HELD a Bible in your HANDS, you can thank Martin Luther and people like him who resisted and persisted.
- If you do NOT believe you need to pay your religious leaders to get your relatives (or even yourself) out of purgatory and into heaven, you can thank Martin Luther and people who followed him who resisted and persisted.
- If you cherish democracy, you can thank Martin Luther and his doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers." The equality of all before God and the law was one of the REASONS he and others like him resisted and persisted.
- If you experience religious liberty, you can thank Martin Luther and the people like him who resisted and persisted against arbitrary control by either the church or the state.
- If you have ever stood up to injustice and said "Here I stand," you can thank Martin Luther and all those who followed him because they resisted and persisted.

Obviously, I'm proud of the Reformation. But then, when we HAD that 500th anniversary, I attended a meeting of the area Ministerium in the area I was serving then. The pastors for MOST of the area churches were there. Now, I'd spent a lot of time PLANNING for Reformation Sunday, so I asked the group what THEY were planning. What was their reply? "What's Reformation Sunday?" I think I stopped BREATHING for a moment. I was confronted with the reality that OTHERS – even PROTESTANTS who EXIST BECAUSE of the Reformation – don't CELEBRATE Reformation Sunday. My world view was shaken.

Maybe we Lutherans should stop patting ourselves on the back, and try to remember what this whole Reformation thing was actually ABOUT.

Sometimes, I think the world looks at Christians and thinks we're just those folks who AVOID things: avoid swearing, gambling, drinking, engaging in the messiness of politics. If you AVOID certain things, THEN you'll be a good Christian, holy and righteous.

But scripture doesn't ALLOW such a NARROW INTERPRETATION of righteousness. Joseph Sittler tells a story of what righteousness MEANS. While in Israel, his car broke down. He took it to a mechanic, a native born Israeli. It took several hours to fix, but when Sittler came to get it, the mechanic was standing there smiling at a perfectly running engine. And he said, "sedeka." Sittler asked him to say the word again and, when he repeated "sedeka," Sittler knew he was hearing the Hebrew word for righteousness. You see, he now had a well-functioning engine, EACH PART working for the good of the WHOLE. THAT'S what righteousness MEANS.

That's also the righteousness GOD envisions: Humans and all creation working in harmony – pistons, spark plugs, carburetor – WHATEVER your job, doing it RIGHT and WELL, involved and working for the good of ALL.

That takes engagement, involvement, even getting a little dirty. If the PISTONS decided they wanted to be SPECIAL, set apart, to remain pure and clean and untouched, then the car wouldn't RUN.

But the ACTIVE, DYNAMIC WORK of righteousness sends us SMACK INTO the mud and grease of this world. Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." And the light isn't put under a bushel. It's not lit and then REMOVED from everything – to protect it – to keep it pure.

Maybe Christians like to LIMIT the definition of righteousness because, well, AVOIDING stuff is lot EASIER. I KNOW how to AVOID swearing, cheating, and stealing. I'm NOT quite SURE how to stop gun violence or homelessness, how to dismantle white privilege and racism, how to prevent sex trafficking, how to save the environment, how to care for refugees in a crisis.

But merely AVOIDING things isn't ENOUGH. TRUE righteousness includes both attending to GOD AND attending to the NEIGHBOR. And that can get complicated, even messy.

The Reformation invites us to imagine the world as it SHOULD be, in contrast to the world as it IS. Oh, the Reformers weren't the FIRST to EXTEND this invitation. Jesus and the prophets, and yes, EVEN the Roman Catholic Church did a lot of that as well.

But that contrast – that GAP between the world as it SHOULD be and the world as it IS – doesn't it feel like that gap has grown WIDER lately? Whatever the CAUSE, it feels like Christians working toward "the world as it SHOULD be" now need greater WISDOM and BOLDER courage.

In the 1940s Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote "the church IS the church ONLY when it exists for others." Self-preservation is the very OPPOSITE of the cross of Jesus Christ. In the 1960s Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us that power without LOVE is TYRANNY; but love without POWER is just sentimentality. BOTH were needed. This POWER MERGED with LOVE was the BRILLIANCE of the Civil Rights Movement.

What is God calling US to BE and DO with OUR love and power – participating in GOD'S love and power – NOW, in the 21st century?

It'll take a LIFETIME to understand the depths of the word "sedeka." It was a word LUTHER struggled with. For YEARS, he believed that we humans must first BECOME righteous to EARN God's love. Through his study of Romans, he discovered that GOD'S righteousness isn't a REQUIREMENT, but a GIFT to sinners, an active and dynamic righteousness, that reaches OUT to us and FILLS us, JUST as we are, through faith in Christ.

God SO wants to make things RIGHT in our lives, and in all of CREATION, that God got involved in even the DEEPEST of ways. God reached into the DIRT to FORM human beings. In Christ, God ENTERED the MESS of sin and evil and brokenness; and though the Spirit, God enters even the DEPTHS of our souls.

God goes the distance for us – for you, for me, for ALL creation. And God calls US to enter INTO this broken world – not to AVOID it; to get DEEPLY involved, to sin BOLDLY, but believe MORE boldly still – working TOGETHER, so all may know God's "sedeka", GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS.

So this Sunday isn't really ABOUT being LUTHERAN, or EVEN about the REFORMERS; it's about GOD ACTING to make the world a little MORE like it SHOULD be. Amen.