

Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Jesus. Jesus Christ. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth. Did I mention Jesus?

If you leave today praising Jesus as your life, your hope, and your destiny then the Reformation begun by Martin Luther 500 years ago was, and still is, worth it. But if you leave worship today and the name on your lips is Martin Luther and not Jesus of Nazareth then Luther lived and labored in vain.

Luther famously hated the name “Lutheran.” He regarded it as an abomination. “Who am I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, that the children of Christ are called by my evil name?” So why do we still use it? Why are we called Emmanuel Lutheran Church? That’s a good question; one for which I do not have a very good answer. I could say something like, “Every church has its brand name, just like every fast food joint has a name, like McDonald’s or Burger King.” But that’s not very helpful and only seems to drive Luther’s point home even further.

It’s also famously true that Luther never sought to create a brand new church. He didn’t envision a town with an Emmanuel Lutheran on one corner and Sacred Heart Roman Catholic on the opposite corner, and St. John Episcopal, and Community Mennonite and Covenant United Methodist just a couple of blocks away. One of the saddest and sorriest outcomes of Luther’s reforms was and still is a divided church. It serves the Devil quite well for all of Christ’s followers to fight about whose name is the greatest, rather than be known by a single name: Christian and followers of Jesus Christ. Hence, my first point.

A sermon is not supposed to be a history lesson. I probably already give too many of those, being a student and lover of history that I am. In our first reading today some of the Jews who believed in Jesus engage him in a discussion of history. “We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been slaves to anyone,” they say. Which just goes to show that anyone can know the facts of history, but still end up interpreting them totally wrong. As children of Abraham they would certainly know of almost five hundred years in which they were slaves in Egypt. So, we must ask ourselves, do we think we know what the Reformation was all about and still get it totally wrong?

I’m never quite sure why this particular passage from John’s gospel shows up each time we commemorate the Reformation. On the one hand, Lutherans might read it heroically, triumphantly and proudly. Here’s how this very narrow, Lutheran-centric interpretation might go: “We now know the truth. Cruel religious leaders attempted to hide the truth by preventing simple layfolk from reading the Bible and worshipping God in their own language. Thankfully, Martin Luther set

us free from the shackles of oppressive Roman Catholic insistence that grace plus works is what saves us.” I know some Lutherans have read this passage in this way, and think of the Reformation as the triumph of Protestant conscience over oppression. But certainly that’s not how Luther read this passage, nor is it what Jesus is really saying here.

We are set free by knowing the truth. The freeing truth is not a set of propositions nor is it some kind of knowledge in general. The truth is a person. A real person, with a name and a history. It is in knowing Jesus, as a real, living person we are set free.

But that raises a question, set free from what? The stock answer is we are set free from sin and death. And that is true. We are free from sin and death. But each generation’s understanding of sin and death manifests itself differently. Luther’s experience of sin and death differs from ours some five hundred years later. For Luther death was an everyday occurrence. Three out 10 children died before they reached the age of 14. If you were fortunate to live into your teenage years or adulthood you just might die of typhus or the plague or smallpox. Only a small percentage of people lived until what we might call old age, which for Luther was in your 50’s or 60’s. Hardly anyone at all made it into their 70’s or 80’s. The lack of any modern medicine meant sickness and the death which almost inevitably followed was filled with suffering and pain. On top of all that Luther, like most Christians of his day, understood death as God’s judgment for sin, which was always understood as human disobedience of God.

What was the remedy of all this sin and death? The church said you needed faith. Which in itself is not wrong. But faith, for it to be real saving faith, needed to be proved by your good works. So to prove your worthiness you could make a charitable contribution to your parish church, or you could take a pilgrimage to a holy shrine and pray before the relic of one of the saints, like a piece of bone from St. Paul or even a strand of straw from the manger of Jesus. At the heart of it all was a stern and judging God who did not take sin lightly, and for those who did not fulfill their obligations to do good deeds, threatened eternal hellfire as judgment.

The story of Luther’s attempt to appease this judging God is well known. Try as he might he could never be satisfied that he’d done enough. But as a student of the Bible he began to hear how God takes on our own sin and our own death in Jesus and transfers everything good about Jesus onto us. The “Happy Exchange” Luther called it, in which our sin and our death is taken by Christ, and in return we receive his life and his righteousness.

All of that is well and good. But what about us? Does our generation today fear death in the same way? Do we see God as a stern, judging God ready to throw anyone and everyone into hell?

I've met very people who believe this. Hardly anyone I know either inside or outside the church lives with a daily fear of death, or a fear that God is one finger-snap away from throwing someone into hell. Our generation's captivity, and that's what it is, a captivity, is rooted in a belief that God hardly matters at all in life. Oh, we pay lip service to God. "In God We Trust," is inscribed on every coin and bill, but it's really the money itself that moves and motivates us along in life. For many people the world has lost any sense of coherence or even purpose. We don't seem to be going anywhere. Chaos and confusion feel like they are overtaking us. Our national and political leaders rarely seem like they are motivated by anything of a higher or nobler purpose than lining their own pockets or giving perks to their friends. We lose faith in our own ideals of advancing equality and justice for all people. People lose faith in the church because they see it as irrelevant to their daily lives, or worse yet, just another player in a game of self-serving interests. We have lost our sense of story. We have lost our sense that the world is moving towards a goal or purpose that is higher or more beautiful or more just than our present day. If Luther was captive to his fear sin and death, our generation is captive to sliding into absolute nothingness in which nothing matters at all.

"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free...If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Freeing truth is a person; Jesus of Nazareth. There is a story that is to be told, especially to a world that doesn't believe any story matters at all. That story tells of Jesus, the man sent by God into our world, who lived and died but now lives, raised from the dead. He is the teller of the story, he is the source of the story, and he is the climax and goal of the story towards which the whole world is moving. In short, it's always about Jesus.

Today the church's reforming task continues to be telling the story of Jesus, over and over again. First and foremost to ourselves, because we live in this same world and are tempted to believe we aren't really going anyplace at all. We need to tell the story of Jesus, sing the story of Jesus, live the story of Jesus. Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.