

**“Reformation 2017: A Call for the Church to Truly Be the Church”**

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus and Happy 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary to all of you Lutheran Christians! Can I get a big “Amen” to that! (That’s wonderful!)

This is a big day for us as Lutherans. (I love all the red out there.) It’s a significant anniversary in our history. It’s an even bigger day and more significant anniversary for the Church as a whole.

What happened 500 years ago, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, was more than an historic moment that eventually led to the creation of (what we know today as) the Lutheran Church. It was the beginning of a reforming movement designed to bring the (entire Church) back to the gospel message of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the sins of the world.

That’s what it was. It was a return to the basics. It was a call for the Church to remember the essentials. The four “solos” (as we shared two weeks ago) were at the heart.

“Sola Scriptura:” We base what we teach and believe about God on Scripture Alone.

“Sola Gratia:” We know we are justified (or made right) in God’s sight by Grace Alone.

“Sola Fide:” We are confident that it is through our faith in Jesus (and what he has done) that we are saved.

And we base our hope and our confidence and any chance we have to make it into heaven, not on what we do or what we have done or what we might accomplish (as we heard from Pastor Jonna last week), but on nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else than “Sola Christus,” the saving and redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

If you hear a bit of passion in my voice (here this morning), it’s not accidental. There is a passion in our history as a church. There is a conviction in who we are, (as Lutheran Christians), that goes deep.

As a result, if we are (in 2017) to be faithful to our calling to live as followers of Jesus Christ, as those Reformers were (500 years ago), then we dare not and we cannot and we must not waiver in our calling (as the Church) to truly be the Church (in a world) and to a world that is in desperate need of what only Jesus Christ can give.

This is a big day in our history. It’s an important milestone in the life of the Church...but let’s not over-think it. The Lutheran Reformation was not a revolution. It was a reformation. And, on many counts, it was a rather conservative one.

Luther didn’t hate the Church. Luther loved the Church. Luther wasn’t intending (in what he did) to (someday) leave the Church. What he wanted was to (stay in it) and to reform it and to rid it of the things (within it) that were against the Word of God. That’s what he was doing. For him, that’s all that mattered.

Now, there were others (in Luther’s day) who had other matters in mind. (No question.) For some, it was a political matter. The political power, (in those days), if you know the history, had shifted (to where it should not have been) and it needed to be shifted back.

For some, it was a cause for violence. The things that had gone wrong had gone so (desperately wrong) that whatever needed to happen (to make it right) needed to happen, so it would be made right.

For others, it all came down to money. For others, it was a matter of land ownership, and territory, and who was in control. Not surprising that the things that corrupt people (today) were the same things that corrupted people in Luther’s day...the very same things.

But, for Martin Luther, it all came down to a few basics, and that’s what set Luther and the other Reformers apart. For him (and for them), if what was (happening in the Church) wasn’t connected to the Word

of God, it had to stop. If what was (going on in the Church) wasn't built on what God has accomplished for us in Jesus, it had to go. (It was that simple.)

And so (it all started) with those 95 Theses. All Luther wanted (when he posted them) was to talk about (and debate) the things that had gone wrong. What he didn't realize (when he did it) was how wrong things had become. (It was all there.)

Purgatory, indulgences, the misuse of power; penance and prayers (to the saints) and promises, (by the Pope and the Church), that were not real. The Reformation had to happen. (It had to happen.)

And so his theses (in 1517) led to his stand before the Holy Roman Emperor (in 1521), where he refused to recant (or take back) the things he had written. And, from there, leading up to the writing of the Augsburg Confession (in 1530), and for the many decades that followed, the Protestant (or protesting) Reformation began and continued to grow.

There is so much history (in our history) that we can't even begin today to scratch the surface of what happened and its significance, for them and for us. But (in spite of all of that), it wasn't that hard to follow. It was actually rather simple.

And so, let me keep it simple (like it was for Luther), before we give you a chance (before communion) to post your own theses on what needs to change (or be reformed) in your own life, and go back to a few of the basics of what it means for us (as the Church) to truly be the Church. A few basics (to our faith), one from each of the three lessons we read today.

For the Church to truly be the Church, it needs, number one, to be consistent in its confession. It needs to be consistent in its confession.

When the reformation movement began and the reformers started their protests, one of the questions they were asked had to do with what they confessed. The question was: "If you're concerned about what's being preached, if you're all worked up over what's been worked up, then tell us what you believe. Give us a clear and compelling statement of your own confession."

And so they did. (They wrote it out.) They went back to the basics, and (what followed) was the Augsburg Confession. Look at what it says. This is basic to our Christian faith.

*Article I: God.*

There is one divine being consisting of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (One God, three persons.)

*Article II: Original Sin.*

Since the fall of Adam, all people are conceived and born in sin and are unable to have true fear and true faith in God, apart from baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit. (Our sin is serious. Apart from God, we are in trouble.)

*Article III: The Son of God.*

In Jesus Christ is found both true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered, crucified, died, and was raised by God the Father for our sins. (That's the story of the Bible. God became one of us (in Jesus) to take on our sin.)

*Article IV: Justification.*

We cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, but we receive forgiveness, by grace, for Christ's sake, through our faith. (There it is. That's our faith. The first four articles of the Augsburg Confession.)

How much more basic can it get? There is one God and one God only. If you follow anything else, you're not following God. There's only one.

We are all sinners. Every one of our lives comes up short. And not just with what we've done, but with who we are. (It goes deeper.) By our nature, from the time we were born, we were born into sin, and we are (on our own) eternally separated from God.

Only in Jesus do we have a chance. He is our Savior. He is the one who died for us. He became one of us. He suffered for us (in our place). He is our only hope.

And it's not going to happen (by that we do). It's by the grace of God, for the sake of Christ, through our faith in him that we become right. (That's our confession.)

Now, our confession goes beyond these first four. There are 28 articles in the Augsburg Confession, each one going into more detail. But the first four lay the foundation. They become the rock upon which the rest of the confessional-house gets built.

As Lutheran Christians, that's who we are. We are a confessing church. We are a church with a consistent confession. The word "confession" means "to speak together, to say the same word." It is a corporate act. It's an act we share as one.

We confess our sin. (We are all sinners.) We confess our faith. (We believe in the one true God.) We speak the same word when it comes to what we proclaim to the world about what we believe.

In seminary, we took classes on "interpreting and confessing." We interpret (the Word of God) in order to confess what we believe. Our interpretation leads to our confession. What we confess is based upon what we have interpreted. And we need to be consistent. We can't bend or waiver or give in when the world (we're trying to reach) has a different idea. The world will always have a different idea. It always...but we can't change.

That was the Apostle Paul's encouragement to young Timothy. (Remember what he said?) He said, "Continue in what you've learned and what you have become convinced of...All Scripture (he says) is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." In other words, don't build your confession on anything else...only on the Word of God.

And then look what he says (and why), and you tell me if this doesn't still apply today. (He says), "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to all kinds of strange and nice-sounding myths."

Nice idea, but it's not scriptural. It's not based upon the saving and redeeming Word of God. And if it's not, then it's not, and it's finally worth nothing. In our confession as a Church, if we are to truly be the Church, we need to be consistent, to "speak together the same word."

There is one God. We are all sinners. Jesus came to save. Our only hope is in him. That's our confession. That's what we believe. And it's consistent, not only with what was said when the reformers took their stand, but with what the Church has believed from the very start.

For the Church to truly be the Church, it needs to be consistent in its confession. It also needs to be confident in its claims. It needs to be confident in what it claims.

We make a lot of claims as the Church. We really do. We claim that God created this world, that he loved this world, and that he still does. We claim that life on this earth is a gift, but that gift will one day come to an end and we will all die. We also claim that (when we die) there is a heaven and there is a hell, and we will either be with God (eternally) or not, based upon our relationship with Christ. There are a lot of claims we make as the Church and when we make the claims we do, we need to be confident in what we claim.

The number one claim we make continues to be the number one stumbling block that exists. We claim that it is only in Jesus that we find life. We claim that it is only in Christ that we have any hope for salvation.

And we claim, contrary to all the (ideas and philosophies and theories) that have ever been put forth, that the only way into the kingdom is through the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son.

All paths (in life) do not lead to the same place. (They don't.) The only path that leads to God is in Christ. The only way to know and to find what's true is in him.

"If you hold to my teaching (Jesus said), you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." (Everyone serves something, Jesus says; everyone is a slave to something.) But if "the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

In other words, it's not enough to have a theory about life. It's no ticket into heaven to think that your (self-created understanding about God-way) is as good as any other. If it's not based upon the truth, then it's not true. And if it's not true, then it's not true and finally there is no hope.

I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. The Christian faith stands or falls on Jesus. (It does.) If he was not the Son of God, then none of this matters. If he did not die on a cross (for our sin) and rise from the dead (for our life) then we're nothing more than a laughing-stock. That's all we are.

But if he was who he claims he was, and if he did do what he claimed he would do, and if what the Scriptures have declared, and the more than 2000 years of Christian witness have given testimony, if it's all true, then we cannot claim anything else.

Jesus Christ is the only answer God has given to us for our sin. He is the only answer. To claim anything else would be dishonest. To proclaim anything else would be unfaithful. And to profess anything else to the world Jesus die to save, would place us (as the Church) outside of the true Church, and far beyond any opportunity (we might have had) to offer (to the world) a word of hope. For the Church to be the Church, it must be confident in what it claims about Christ.

And third, for the Church to truly be the Church, it needs to be consistent in its confession, confident in its claims, and clear in the choice it makes to follow and to serve the One True God.

Long before our Lord was born into this world, the same challenge was set before the Old Testament people of Israel. Martin Luther was not the first to call for a Reformation. In the Old Testament, the people had strayed. They had wandered so far from God that you'd think they never knew.

And so, Joshua, the one who was their leader after Moses, called them out. "It's time to make a choice. It's time (he said) to take a stand."

If God is your God, then put away those other gods. If God is where you place your hope, then stop placing hope in something else. You cannot have it both ways in life. You cannot pretend that you're a follower (in your life) if (in your life) you're not following. (It doesn't work.) And so, "serve the Lord." (Serve the Lord.)

"But...if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you," (If all this talk about Martin Luther and the Reformation, about having a confession and holding to it, being confident in the claims we make about Christ, about how Jesus is the only way.) "If all of this seems undesirable, then choose for yourselves whom you will serve. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. As for me and (this household) this is where we must stand. And not just on this 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Day, but on each day and every day until our Lord comes back or calls us home.

In closing today, I want you to take a look at Martin Luther's statement, at the Diet of Worms (in 1521), in front of the Holy Roman Emperor, all of the Princes and Cardinals and leaders in both Church and State, with his career and quite possibly his life (literally) at stake. When asked to take it all back, look at what he said. He said...

*"Since your majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and councils*

*for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen."*

And so it was, 500 years ago. And so it is today. This world needs Jesus. This world is in desperate need of Christ. In 2017, as his Church, we must take a stand, and we cannot "recant" and back down. Amen.