

On October 28, we had as our guest preacher the Rev. Dr. Alan Lai of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. His sermon is not available for posting. In its place, we present a sermon preached by Pastor James Brown on Reformation Sunday, October 28, 2007.

NAILING IT!

Reformation Sunday – Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

I must have been about eight years old when my uncle invited me down to his basement workshop to show me something. Excited by what promised to be a surprise, I discovered upon arrival that he had a 2x4 set up on a small table, and next to the table were about a dozen 3-inch nails. He wanted to teach me a life skill that day – specifically how to use hammer and nail. I remember he showed me how to start the nail in the wood. He showed me how to hold the hammer without choking it. He showed me how to straighten a nail that was going into the wood on an angle and, believe me, most of those first nails had quite a lean to them. He showed me how to pull out nails, using the claw on the back of the hammer head. I must have spent the better part of an hour putting nails into that piece of wood that day, taking them out, and starting them again in a new spot, if they were salvageable. It was a lesson I'll never forget. And I enjoyed it! I could make lots of noise, get a little exercise, and dream about using this new-found knowledge to build things!

There is something immensely satisfying about driving nails. Just thinking about it, I can remember what it feels like to grip the handle; feel the shock in my upper body when hammer head collides with nail head, and then sense the change in the feel of the last stroke of the hammer as the nail finds home and the nail head becomes flush with the surface of the wood.

I can understand how pounding nails can be therapy when people are angry or upset. I can imagine how good it felt for Martin Luther, after years of frustration with a corrupt church, to nail his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg church on October 31, 1517.

My guess is that part of the therapeutic value of using a hammer is that we may have negative associations with the noise and the violence involved, but the outcome is positive. Building things, securing things, making things, construction – these are all good things in our world view. Of late, the expression “I nailed it!” has come to mean “I succeeded – and then some!” When a student says of an exam or test in school “I nailed it!” we understand that they know they did well. There is also a sense of completion when “I nailed it!” is used. It has come to mean that something is finished and we can now move on. Although the baseball world is, itself, full of metaphors, it's not unusual to hear the commentator on one of the TV sports channels tell us the batter “nailed it” when he hits the ball deep into the outfield.

What fascinates me about the idea of securing something with hammer and nails is that there is often an ambiguous value to it. “Nailing” something or “closure” to borrow a term from the world of psychotherapy can be both helpful and unhelpful. I may want to nail the feet of my barbecue to the deck so that on days when the winds are high, the barbecue is not blown over. But doing so prevents me from easily moving it into the garage for the winter; and I may damage the deck. There may be a better solution to the problem of tipping barbecues. In this case, the metaphor of “nailing it,” meaning “to solve the problem” works better than its literal reference. Martin Luther “nailed” the problems of the medieval church by posting the 95 Theses. But in doing so, he wanted to open dialogue among people, not end it. And so, there is sometimes a double value to what may be commonly understood as unambiguous.

Reform or “re-formation” is both good and bad – good for some and difficult for others. The present pope has recently been revealed as one for whom the reforms of Vatican II were difficult, and he is systematically using his absolute power to make changes that are contrary to the first principles of the Second Vatican Council of 1960-62. Some would say, of course, that he is a reformer; others say he is a reactionary.

What is interesting to me is that whatever our metaphors, however long the nails we use to secure something, the Spirit of God is not easily controlled. And so there is (again) a double edge to Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” There is great appeal to knowing the truth: it settles things, it orders things, and puts things right. But, Jesus says, knowing the truth is not the end, but rather the beginning. When we know the truth, new questions

surface. Creativity is born. We seek to apply the truth we have received. In our life in the Spirit, this is where belief morphs into faith; where the law is not something contained in the Good Book, but is, rather, written in our hearts, so that law and gospel in our hands can enter into a dynamic relationship – as they did in Jesus' hands for the benefit of those who were suffering. His "freedom" increased God's glory. Our faith in God's grace frees us to live the abundant life of committed discipleship, because the truth we know is that nothing can separate us from the powerful love of God.

One of the things I love about the K-W Council of Churches is that together we are free of denominationalism and the need to preserve the institutional church: we can take risks. A few years ago, we reached out to the non-Christian faiths in our community and invited them to sit at the table with us and talk about our common humanity. As both Sandy Milne and Brice Balmer love to remind us, we did this *before* September 11, 2001, even though the first meeting took place just a few days after the attack on the United States. In 2006, we took the whole year to talk about racism and violence in Waterloo Region, and how churches can give leadership in countering fear and prejudice. In 2007, we looked at injustice as it was meted out by our federal government on refugees; we had an encounter at St. John's Kitchen as part of a recurring emphasis on why we tolerate widespread poverty in this, one of the most affluent parts of Canada. We are also tried to provide a firm theological foundation for Christians who know it is the right thing to be involved in the Environmental Movement, but don't know why.

The truth, the truth of God's love for us shown in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, frees us to be like him; to be people fully alive in the Spirit of the risen Christ; people who can walk through moral and spiritual tempests, whirlwind, and earthquakes and not fear. What we are called to nail down is the free reign of oppression, injustice, and unfaith. In so doing, like Martin Luther, we shall live the life of inspired, world-changing discipleship – to the glory of God.