

## EMBRACING THE REFORMATION OF OUR MINISTRY AND MISSION

### Reformation Sunday, 2013: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28

People often ask me to clarify the meaning of the word “evangelical” in our congregation’s official name, Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, or the same word found on the cover of our worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. In North America, “evangelical” is used most frequently to describe churches that read the Bible literally, churches that would also describe themselves as Fundamentalist or Bible-believing. Depending on who is asking the question, these folks are either disappointed or relieved by my answer. For Lutherans, I tell my inquirers, the word “evangelical” refers to our practice of using the Bible as our source for theology and doctrine. In the years leading up to and following the year 1517, Martin Luther called people away from the teachings of the church that did not have their origin in Holy Scripture, calling them *to* doctrines and beliefs that had their roots in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the teaching of Saint Paul. The most famous example of non-Biblical doctrine, and the one that certainly got Luther’s attention, was the church’s teaching concerning Purgatory, a kind of holding tank in the afterlife for the not-so-righteous; a no-man’s land between heaven and hell for the not-quite damned and not-yet-saved. The church of Luther’s day taught that it could intercede on behalf of specific souls in Purgatory and thereby insure their salvation. There was a cost for such intercession, however, and it was at the point of the church selling this service to its members that Luther became enraged. Selling what were called “Indulgences” was manipulative, commercial, and an abuse of power, Luther said in so many words. He countered the church’s teaching with a teaching from Saint Paul in the Letter to the Romans: “we are saved by grace through faith.” Developing Saint Paul’s theology of salvation into the theology of justification, Luther revealed the love of God as unbounded and sufficient for salvation. The proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection alone showed that there was nothing that was beyond the power of the love of God: if death doesn’t have the final word, sin certainly doesn’t, he concluded. Using passages such as this morning’s Second Reading, Luther taught that faith in Jesus as God’s gift of salvation for the world trumps the condemnation of the law of sin and death. Intercession on behalf of the dead and a belief in Purgatory were teachings that served the church’s self-interest, Luther held; such things certainly did not have their origin in Holy Scripture.

And so, when the Roman Church in Germany was eventually re-established as distinct and separate from Rome, it became known as the Evangelical Church or (in German) the Evangelische Kirche, the church whose theology and doctrine find their source in the teachings of Holy Scripture. The word “Lutheran” was originally a pejorative to distinguish it, first of all, as not the Roman Catholic Church, and secondly as apart from other break-away groups who followed – for example, the churches founded by John Calvin (the Calvinists) and John and Charles Wesley (the Wesleyans, who were also known as Methodists, another pejorative term to describe the Wesleys’ doctrine of entire sanctification).

For present-day Lutherans, I see the word “evangelical” as a description of how we define ourselves both in the context of Christian denominationalism and in the larger context of society. We stand with one foot in the proclamation of Holy Scripture and one foot in the present-day reality of the world; and we use Scripture, passing through a filter of Lutheran theology, to interpret our present experience. Another way of describing our stance was Karl Barth’s image of the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Our celebration of Reformation, however, may not fit this paradigm. Unlike most Sundays and festivals in the church year, Reformation does not only look back and into the present; it also looks ahead, acknowledging that both as individuals and together as we form the church, we are always reforming and being reformed. Christian discipleship is not static; it is dynamic. Instead of standing firm in faith, we are called by God to walk in faith carrying all our accompanying doubt and uncertainty in our backpacks as we go. It is challenging to be a church always reforming and always being reformed, because walking in faith is far more complicated than standing our ground. But this is precisely the mark of discipleship and apostleship. Disciples are those who learn from the gospel; apostles are those who are sent out with the gospel.

What is interesting to me is that the tradition of reforming and being reformed did not start with Martin Luther’s discontent with the church of his day. It begins much earlier in the relationship shared by God and those who love God. An example of this tradition is given in today’s First Reading. Jeremiah proclaims God’s will to make a new covenant with the Hebrew people, a covenant which will supersede all the previous covenants which the people have broken. In today’s passage, God is revealed as the

God of renewal and salvation; and the message is that God will work with whatever people, whatever circumstances are at hand to create something new, to make new beginnings.

Psalm 46, which we sang as *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, shows the landscape of reformation and transformation. The psalm is full of images of both security and disaster: reformation may well feel like the world is falling to bits, the psalmist writes; mountains shaking, earthquakes. But in the midst of all the uproar and tottering is One who is refuge and security; One who remains steadfast and faithful. We may not know the meaning of the changes we see in our church right now, but we do know that at the heart of all we experience and endure, individually and together as we form the church, at the heart and centre of life, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble".

In our Second Reading, Paul considers the reformation of Judaism initiated by Jesus. We rarely identify Jesus as a reformer, but, in fact, he was nothing less. He went head-to-head with the temple hierarchy in Jerusalem and suffered a fate far worse than Luther's. In a sense, Saint Paul runs with the torch passed to him by Jesus. In Jesus' day, the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and others had systematized righteousness to the end that it was a matter of keeping the laws of the Torah, the book of Moses. Paul sees God's law and the keeping of the laws as falling short. He has been exposed to the teachings of Jesus and understands Jesus and his embodied message as salutary in and of itself. Paul then leaps forward to confess Jesus as God's righteousness, given for the saving of the world. This is radical, man – a complete reinvention of faith and holiness: the people of God always reforming and being reformed.

This past Friday, two students from St. Mary's High School met with me to inquire about Lutheran Christianity for their religion class. With this year's celebration of Reformation on the horizon, it was almost surreal to reflect with two young Catholics on what it means to be a Catholic Christian or a Lutheran Christian in our time and place. Our shared history is so conflicted and so contentious. And we now find ourselves in a world that understands less and less of what life in the Spirit means. Those of us who remain disciples and apostles no longer have the privilege of labelling one another or distinguishing ourselves from one another. We are sisters and brothers in Christ through very little of our own doing. We are reforming and being reformed by the God who, at one and the same time, calls us into the present and leads us into the future. Our mission and ministry is marked by this reality. "We are not alone: we live in God's world."\*

\*reference to the first article of A New Creed,  
The United Church of Canada, 1968, 1980, and 1994.