

Bishop Erik K.J. Gronberg, PhD
Reformation Day Sermon
Text: John 15
Brite Divinity School, Robert Carr Chapel-Fort Worth, TX
October 31, 2017-11am

Dear friends, I am honored and privileged to be here with you all today. I sincerely thank Dean Williams, Rev. Shelton, and the Brite faculty and community for the invitation and hospitality.

Today we commemorate Martin Luther, his 95 theses. 500 years ago, a new thing, boldly proclaiming salvation was not for sale. Today we commemorate that new thing and look forward to the new things God continues to do in God's church.

As a result, it is somewhat curious to me that on this day of new things you have invited me to preach. A white, increasingly middle age, heterosexual male bishop. I clearly do not represent a new thing. Guys like me have been preaching in the church for a LONG time.

Yet, I also understand my invitation being less about me and more about my role as a leader in a denomination which carries on the name of Luther. That subscribes to the confessions of the Lutheran church, and in 2017, that confession of faith does, in North Texas, perhaps make me at least a bit exotic.

Thank you for this opportunity. Today is indeed an important day to us as Lutheran Christians. A day we have looked forward to with anticipation and also examination. Asking questions...Why exactly we continue to exist? Is there a need for Lutheran confessional Christians in 2017? What do we bring to the table? What is our baggage? Where are we going?

First off, we must acknowledge we have our fair share of baggage. We are, as Lutherans, divided. When I speak for Lutherans I can really only speak for myself and perhaps my denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

We can of course blame Martin for this. He started it all by standing on individual conscious and choice. He also wrote things, particularly about the Jews, we have repented from, have officially rejected, and still lament. Additionally, this 500th we have been careful to say this is a commemoration, not a victorious celebration. To that end we have signed agreements with the Roman Catholic Church to work towards communion, starting from our agreements, not conflict.

We also recognize we are an overwhelmingly white, geographically and economically homogenous denomination. Racism, patriarchy, sexism, and heteronormativity continue to infect our church and our world and we have benefited from privilege and colonialism. These are truths that as people who hold a theological conviction about law and gospel we must admit and acknowledge. We have baggage. We are convicted by the law, guilty as charged.

Yet unsurprisingly, since I have responded to the call of leadership in this church it is apparent I do believe there is still a need for us Lutherans, a name given to us as a slur and in derision. We are part of the living organism that is God's church, the branches connected to Jesus' vine, a part of the new thing we believe God did in Jesus including us Gentile sinners in God's future. Not a promise that excludes others who hold ties to Abraham but includes us in hope. We bring a perspective to this body and also, increasingly, to the interreligious conversations we engage worldwide that is, I believe, important.

Lutheran confessional theology is clear that the Word of God is alive and at work. That theology and preaching is for proclamation. That the Law and Gospel must be clearly noted and that a sermon is literally intended to convict us and then raise the dead. As Gracia Grindal, noted hymn translator and a professor's Kendra and I had at Luther Seminary, would remind us, a good measure of a sermon is "did Jesus have to die for what just got said?"

God's word, Lutherans confess and believe, is active and alive. It is working faith through proclamation. I am convicted by the law that always accuses, the *lex semper accusat*, exposing once more my sinful nature. The law speaks to our brokenness and broken relationships, failure to love neighbor as ourselves, complicity in systems of oppression, attempts at self-justification and easy judgement of others, self-righteousness and willingness to dismiss those who we disagree with or find repugnant, of simply our inability or desire to follow the first commandment, to put God first. This is the righteousness of God that drove Luther to his knees in despair. For how could he ever be able to satisfy this law?

This law convicts us, *lex semper accusat*, and yet that conviction brings life. For without honest conviction there is no need for the gospel, no need for Golgotha. As Paul wrote in Romans "the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" The Lutheran confessional witness stands firm, this is not a faith that we can choose. It is not an easy gospel, a gospel promising prosperity and your best life, but instead is a gift that standing convicted prepares us to hear the life giving good news.

Good news that goes just beyond our pericope for this morning into verse 16 of John's 15th chapter. Jesus saying to us "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." Hearing this word, convicted by the law, the Holy Spirit can do her thing and work faith in us. Faith in the one who stood with the poor and was crucified by empire. Faith freeing us from the burden of the law, the power of sin, death, and the devil. Faith that brings forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation. Faith that sends us forth into the world unconcerned about our future but deeply concerned about our neighbor.

The Lutheran World Federation, a global communion of 145 churches, 75 million Lutherans in 98 countries worldwide, held its 2017 General Assembly in Namibia earlier this year. Namibia, located in Southern Africa, you might be surprised to learn is a majority Lutheran nation. Choosing to have this assembly in Africa, in 2017, was not the first time the LWF had gathered in Africa and was no accident. It was a statement and recognition that the global gravity of Lutheranism, as with much of Christianity, has shifted south.

The assembly had a core theme unsurprising for Lutherans... "Liberated by God's Grace." Grace, well there is a real creative theme for Lutherans. But then it also developed three sub-themes that grow from this liberation, Salvation – Not for Sale, Human Beings – Not for Sale, Creation – Not for Sale.

The 95 theses we commemorate today stated Luther's core theological conviction. Salvation is not for sale. Indulgences were rejected and continue to stand rejected. God's mercy is given by God. As we confessed earlier "If you, O God, should mark sins, who could stand? But there is forgiveness in you."

Forgiveness of a gracious God whose mercy is shown throughout the scriptures, forgiveness that we who cling to this Christian story proclaim was given on the cross of Calvary, Jesus died for this and we confess baptism unites us to this death, and to the life and victory won in the empty tomb.

Having received that Salvation then, freely given, we are convinced that we must serve our neighbor. Human beings are not a commodity and neither is God's earth. This is not an abject repudiation of capitalism but a critique and necessary corrective to the commodification of all aspects of life that Luther himself would no doubt approve. Each person is created in the image of God with incomparable worth and value. Christian's are compelled to work against human trafficking, to speak for justice, compassion for the marginalized and the alien in the land. To

speak against racism, misogyny, discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, the list could and does go on.

This creation is God's gift to us to steward generation to generation. One story, perhaps apocryphal, was that Luther's spouse, Katie, recognized the value of clean water in particular for brewing beer. So she had the town council pass an ordinance against polluting the river Elbe in Wittenberg. Like many of the stories of Luther this may or may not have happened, but as Texans we know, why ruin a good story with too many facts. God's earth is a gift and trust, it should not be for sale. Freed in Christ, we are to tend and care for it as we care for our neighbors.

Thank you again for the privilege of being with you today on this, the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the reformation. In the Lutheran tradition we like to use the phrase *Semper Reformanda*, always reforming. This is why, as I understand it, Brite Divinity school exists. Leaders within the reform tradition, sensing institutional and denominational rigidity discerned they needed yet more reformation. So the Disciples of Christ, Christian Church, began. Indeed, our institutions are always in need of reformation. Centering us once more on the cross of Christ and the hope of the gospel.

I pray that reformation, by the will of the Holy Spirit, will move us ever closer to understanding the gift of one another. Of community, recognizing that we are branches connected to the true vine, Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of the Church. He is the crucified and risen one, who feeds us and sends us each day to love and serve in God's broken and redeemed world. This is the God we proclaim, who gave God's very self so we might have life. God bless you and I pray we will be ever growing in mission together. Amen.