

NT/NL Parish Lay Ministry Academy
Lutheran Identity
Spring, 2026

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Notes from the instructor

I want you to have time for reflection, not just the accumulation of knowledge and facts. We simply do not have enough time to cover all facets of the Lutheran faith and its history and practice in the allotted time. We will try to focus on what is important during our time together and perhaps you will become curious about the rest and reserve time for further study.

Identity is personal. Identity may be described and it may be defined, but unless identity is lived, it isn't really much of an identity. We will spend time taking about real ways in which this faith identity intersects with daily life. This is as important as the basic knowledge.

Texts

- *By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (ISBN 978-1-5064-3148-2)
- *The Freedom of a Christian*, by Martin Luther, (ISBN 978-1-5064-1351-8) - The Annotated Luther Study Edition, edited by Timothy J. Wengert – for this particular version you might have to go to augsburgfortress.org
- *Characteristically Lutheran Leanings*, by Mark U. Edwards, Jr. – this article is provided along with the syllabus
- *Martin Luther and the Called Life* by Mark D. Tranvik (ISBN 978-1-4514-9011-4) – seems to be available at <https://www.wearsparkhouse.org/store/product/9781451490114/Martin-Luther-and-the-Called-Life> in both print and digital versions
- *ELCA Social Statement on Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All* - https://elcamediaresources.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/wp-content/uploads/Faith_and_Civic_Life_Seeking_the_Wellbeing_of_All_Social_Statement.pdf
- *Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments* by Samuel Torvend (ISBN 978-1-5326-0839-1)

Other Resources and Readings

The Book of Concord, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (ISBN 978-0-8006-2740-9)

The Lutheran Handbook by Augsburg Fortress Publishers (ISBN 978-0-8066-5179-8)

By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism – Facilitator Guide (ISBN 978-1-5064-3149-9) – available at augsburgfortress.org

Book of Harmony: Spirit and Service in the Lutheran Confessions, by Martin J Lohrmann (ISBN 978-1-5064-0018-1)

Lutheran Questions, Lutheran Answers, by Martin E. Marty (ISBN 978-0-8066-5350-1)

Luther the Reformer, by James M. Kittelson and Hans H Wiersma (ISBN 978-1-4514-8888-3)

Three Treatises, by Martin Luther (ISBN 978-0-8006-1639-7)

Lutherans in America, by Mark Granquist (ISBN 978-1-4514-7228-8)

A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited by Geoffrey B Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (ISBN 978-0-06-064214-3)

Stupid Freedom: A Novel Take on the Late Luther, by Martin Lohrmann (ISBN 978-1-9818-5670-1)

Movies

Martin Luther (1953)

Luther (1974)

Martin Luther: Heretic (1983)

Luther (2003)

Rick Steves' Opening the Door to Luther (2007)

Rick Steves' Luther and the Reformation (2016)

Martin Luther: The Idea that Changed the World (2017)

Course Description

“Lutheran Identity” will help students build an understanding of the unique contributions of the Lutheran expression of Christianity in terms of history, theology, and lived experience.

Learning Outcomes

Be able to articulate the foundational tenets of the Lutheran faith and recognize them in readings

Be able to articulate the benefits of these foundational tenets

Create a short (2 – 4 minutes) elevator speech articulating the importance and influence of the Lutheran faith in your life

Course Outline

Reading assignments should be completed by the date of the class. While I won't collect any notes that you may make, you should have them available so that you can participate in class discussion. Written assignments will be due a week before the class date so that I have a chance to look over them before our class.

March 14, 2026 – due by March 7, 2026

- Read *By Heart*
- Read “Characteristically Lutheran Leanings” by Mark U. Edwards
Make note of any new information or insights that arise as you read.
Make note of where you see the foundational tenets in the readings and in the catechism. Do you see any that should be added to our list? What are the benefits of the tenets you find in the readings?

April 11, 2026 – due by April 4, 2026

- Complete the ***By Heart Followup Assignment*** (see below)
- Read *Martin Luther and the Called Life*
- Read *The Freedom of a Christian*
Make note of any new information or insights that arise as you read.
Make note of where you see the foundational tenets in the readings and in the catechism. Do you see any that should be added to our list? What are the benefits of the tenets you find in the readings?

May 9, 2026 – due by May 2, 2026

- Complete the ***Martin Luther and the Called Life Followup Assignment*** (see below)
- Read *Luther and the Hungry Poor*
Make note of any new information or insights that arise as you read.
Make note of where you see the foundational tenets in the readings and in the catechism. Do you see any that should be added to our list? What are the benefits of the tenets you find in the readings?

Final Assignment – due by June 13, 2026 (see below)

Assignments

**By Heart Followup Assignment –
(due one week before the April session – April 4)**

Choose one question from each of the following sections (Scripture and Tradition, Luther's Explanations, and Luther's Story) and write two or three paragraphs on each question. The response should demonstrate knowledge of the material and its application to one's own life. (Questions were taken from *By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism – Facilitator Guide* by Troy Troftgruben)

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Emphasis on being a *learner* of the faith dates all the way back to the Bible – especially the ministry of Jesus. Revisit (or perhaps reread) the first three paragraphs of the section “Christian Basics’ and the Bible” (p. 18). While all the gospels refer to Jesus’ twelve followers and “disciples” (lit. “learners”), Matthew’s gospel especially portrays Jesus as the perfect teacher (see Matthew 5:1-2, for example). Jesus sought to form his followers to be like him (10:24-25), to be “trained for the kingdom” (13:52), and finally to carry on his work of teaching others (28:18-20). At the same time, these learners remained followers “of little faith” (8:26, 17:20) who struggled with doubts (14:28-31; 28:17) and needed regular forgiveness (6:12; 18:21-35). And yet these struggling doubters were nonetheless the salt of the earth (5:13), the light of the world (5:14) and the rock on which Jesus’ church would be built (16:17-18).

Question: What does it mean to think of yourself as a “learner” of Jesus and his teachings? Besides being a person of faith, what does it mean to identify as someone committed to *learning* about that faith in a lifelong way – like Jesus’ disciples?

OR

Revisit the first two paragraphs of Chapter 2 (pp. 43-44). The Ten Commandments not only come from scripture (Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21), they stand at the center of a larger story: God saved an enslaved people and led them into a place of security, safety, and order (the Exodus story). In this story, the Commandments serve to foster relationships with God and one another by establishing the boundaries for the sake of blessings.

Question: Read the Ten Commandments in their scriptural context (Exodus 20:1-17 or Deuteronomy 5:6-21). Imagine what it must have been like for a newly free, vagabond people to be suddenly without any laws, governance, or order. Now consider what boundaries and blessings such a people might have experienced in the Ten Commandments. How does stepping into the shoes of the freed Israelites make you think differently about the Ten Commandments?

OR

As the chapter points out, the second article of the Creed challenges a host of historic heresies about Jesus. Revisit the second through sixth paragraphs in the section on

the second article, beginning with “First, there is ...” (pp. 87-90). These heresies were prevalent in the early church and were taking root at the time of the New Testament writings (see, for example, 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; 2 Peter 3:3-10; 1 John 4:2-3; 5:6-7).

Question: Where do you see any of these “heresies” at work today? (Consider especially Marcionism, which contrasts the “bumbling fool God of ancient Israel with the loving God of Jesus Christ,” p. 89.). What misleading ideas about Jesus do you see at work in the surrounding culture, the church, or us – perhaps things that a Christian creed today might address.

OR

Luther emphasizes the boldness and intimacy that the introduction “Our Father” implies. In contrast to some medieval explanations, Luther writes that we may ask God “boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father.” Jesus’ reference to God as “Father” (see Matthew 6:9 and Luke 11:2) is not unique in scripture (see Deuteronomy 32:6; Psalm 103:13; Proverbs 3:12; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 31:9; Malachi 2:10). Its prominence at the start of this prayer certainly emphasizes intimacy, endearment, and love. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul understood “Abba” (Aramaic for “Father” or “Papa”) as the cry of Spirit-led believers (Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15-16; see also Mark 14:36).

Question: Reflect on the use of “Father” in this prayer, and revisit the last two paragraphs of the section “Introduction” in the chapter, beginning with “Luther sees the Christian faith ...” (p. 107). What do you think of this language? What alternative could you use that preserves the significance of the address? If your congregation uses an alternative, how and why was that decision made?

OR

To explain the significance of baptism, Luther referred directly to Paul’s words in Romans 6. Read Romans 6:1-5 (optional vv. 6-14). Notice how Paul speaks of baptism as a form of *death* (see also Mark 10:38-39), and only secondarily associates it with resurrection and life. Look also at Luther’s comments about baptism in the sidebar that begins, “In the Large Catechism, Luther reflects ...” (p. 139).

Question: To what extent does this metaphor of burial and death inform and influence your understanding of baptism for the Christian life?

OR

Revisit the chapter’s discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, on partaking in an “unworthy” manner (p. 156). Paul’s primary concerns are far more social and communal than individual and personal: they focus on despising the needs of poorer sisters and brothers in the community and not appreciating their value with the body of Christ. This makes Paul’s word in 1 Corinthians 11:29 regarding “the body” a reference not to the eucharistic elements but to the community of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

Question: When we commune together, how can we be deliberate about honoring “the body of Christ” – the community of Christ – authentically?

OR

Luther presents the Household Chart as “scriptural job descriptions for how people might live out their faith in God-pleasing ways in whatever roles they play: spouses, bosses or employees, parents or children, friends or neighbors, pastors or parishioners, the governing and the governed” (p. 186). Rigid as some of these scripture passages may sound initially, they are drawn from larger contexts. And the Bible itself offers many examples of particular issues being addressed differently by different voices at various times. The chapter summarizes: “The Bible knows that our lives are complex, that we frequently hold many roles at the same time, and that the same rules don’t always apply to every situation. Scripture talks to scripture, creating more of a conversation about faith than a set of rigid laws.” (p. 186).

Question: What do you think of this understanding of the Bible? Do you find it encouraging, helpful, provocative, or something else? Explain.

LUTHER’S EXPLANATIONS

Luther’s Small Catechism was hardly the first handbook of basic Christian teaching. But in his day there was renewed interest in teaching the catechism, and his version got to the heart of the matter more concisely than many alternative versions. Revisit the opening paragraphs of the section “Luther’s Small Catechism and the Reformation” (p. 33) and the paragraph just before it and consider the following question:

Question: Concise summaries of major topics are popular today (for example, the _____ *for Dummies* instruction book series). And at some level, they have always been appreciated. What are the distinctive contributions of a concise summary of Christian beliefs like the Small Catechism? Why is it one of the most significant writings Martin Luther ever wrote?

OR

Luther’s explanation to the first commandment is one of his best known. In the Large Catechism, he writes, “Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.” In saying this, Luther talks less about what we believe theoretically (or cognitively) and much more about how we *behave* and *orient our lives*. Turn to the chapter’s section on the first commandment and reread the last sentence of the first paragraph (“For Luther, your chosen god ...”) and the next paragraph in its entirety (p. 51).

Question: How do you react to Luther’s idea that the thing you most fear losing is really your God? What are the things you most fear losing? How are they rival “gods” in your daily living?

OR

Reread the first paragraph in the “Third Article” section, beginning with “Luther’s words are rather shocking ...” (p. 92). Luther describes faith as a gift, not as something we do.

Question: What are some examples of us living as though faith is something we produce, muster, forcibly will, or make happen? What is challenging and what is liberating about Luther’s countercultural view of faith as a gift of the Holy Spirit?

OR

To explain the fifth petition, Luther emphasized both our unworthiness and God’s willingness to “give us all things by grace.” Revisit the fourth paragraph in the “Fifth Petition” section, beginning with “Luther’s reformation sprang ...” (p. 116), paying special attention to the line “God forgives us freely, without any merit on our part.”

Question: How do you live from the perspective that God freely forgives you without merit and without condition? In your own experience, what is the relationship between your being freely forgiven and your ability to forgive others?

OR

To explain the notion of biblical repentance, Luther emphasized that it is not a “one and done” act, but something that should characterize the entirety of the Christian life. Revisit the paragraph that begins, “Already in the very first of the *Ninety-five Theses* ...” (p. 145), especially the last line regarding baptism as an act of “*daily* contrition and repentance.”

Question: As Lutherans, we regularly confess our sins and give thanks for the gift of baptism in worship. Does your life reflect daily confession and repentance, along with receiving God’s forgiveness and rising to new life? In other words, how are these liturgical acts expressed – how do they take on flesh – in daily life?

OR

The two words “for you” are paramount for Luther. Revisit his response to the question “What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?” (p. 162). And the paragraph that begins, “For you.’ This is crucial for Luther ...” (p.163). See especially the last line: “The physical reception of the bread and wine makes personal and individual what God has promised the whole church – the essential thing – that God accepts us and makes us children of God.”

Question: How often do you reflect on the words “for you” as you receive communion? What helps you hear or hinders you from hearing personally and truly that Christ is “for you”?

OR

The Household Chart in the Small Catechism, as the chapter explains, “rests on this understanding that all Christians can fully live out their faith in the ordinary relationships that God has given them on earth. People do not need to enter a monastery, take ordination vows, or work in the church to become truly spiritual. Baptism already makes all Christians full children of God. While some will serve God and neighbors through church work, others serve in spiritually equal ways in their homes, jobs, studies,

friendships, and communities” (p. 179). The same section later describes three “walks of life” where people primarily live out their faith: the household or family government, and church (pp. 181-182).

Question: In which of these “walks of life” (the home, government, church) do you find it easiest to live out your faith? Which are more difficult for you to connect to your faith? Explain.

LUTHER’S STORY

Chapter 1 in the *By Heart* book identifies something about Luther that many today overlook: he was a teacher at heart. Revisit the second, third, and fourth paragraphs in the section “Luther’s Small Catechism and the Reformation” (pp. 33-34) and reflect on just how much Luther identified himself as a “teacher” of the church.

Question: Among the many titles we associate with Martin Luther (reformer, pastor/priest, theologian), what does it mean to think of him primarily as an *educator*. In what ways would it be helpful for pastors, ministers, and church people of all kinds today to see themselves as *educators of the faith* more than they perhaps currently do?

OR

The fourth commandment was a bit personal for Luther. Revisit the first paragraph in the fourth commandment section (p. 58), especially the displeasure Luther’s father experienced over his son’s choice to join a religious order. This scenario is a fine example of the tensions some of us experience between honoring our parents and disagreeing with them – and disobeying them – on moral grounds. The same kinds of tensions play out in honoring and obeying those in civil authority. For more on honoring parents and civil authorities in scripture, see Luke 2:51; Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20; Acts 5:29; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Question: What fruitful things result when we honor our parents and those in civil authority? When are we called to disobey our parents or those in authority for the sake of honoring God (see Acts 5:29).

OR

Behind Luther’s explanation of the first article is his understanding of vocation and the significance of particular stations of life. Revisit the chapter’s discussion of these in the fifth and sixth paragraphs from the end of the “First Article” section, beginning with “In Luther’s theological thinking” and continuing through “doing so in Christian faith” (p. 85). Luther emphasized the value of our stations in life for the sake of God’s created order.

Question: Reflect on the significance of the various stations you occupy (in your family, at work, in your community, in your faith community, elsewhere). How do your stations maintain and preserve God’s creation? Think about Luther’s countercultural stance against valuing some vocations (namely, the ordained and the cloistered) over others, and instead regarding diaper changing as highly as ordained ministry. How does this help you think about your own vocation, job, or station in life?

OR

In his explanation of the seventh petition, Luther named the evils he saw filling the world and affecting lives. Reread the first paragraph in the “Seventh Petition” section (p. 120), especially the lines “Living in the most affluent nation on earth may insulate us from life’s realities. Luther, however, saw suffering in every human’s life and believed that we must pray in the midst of that suffering.”

Question: How would you describe the evils that threaten your body, soul, property, and reputation? Imagine how Christians in other parts of the world might answer this question. How does your worldview affect the way you understand the presence of evil in the world?

OR

Revisit three paragraphs on page 142, beginning with “The matter of salvation and baptism ...”. Notice Luther’s personal experience as a father and pastor, and the theological flexibility these personal encounters generated in him.

Question: What do you make of these lines: “God’s grace saves, not baptism or anything else. Certainly God works our salvation and distributes grace through the means instituted by Christ. But God has even more options. Nothing is a requirement for grace, not even baptism. Baptism thus should never be made into a ‘must’ or law. It is best celebrated as a gift” (p. 142). Do you agree? Why or why not?

Extension: What rituals or activities are we prone to turn into “musts” or laws, instead of celebrating them as gifts, in our churches? Why?

OR

Near and dear to Luther’s heart was this sacrament’s promise of the forgiveness of sins. Reread the whole first paragraph in the section “Strengthened by forgiveness; freed to serve” (p. 167).

Question: How are you changed by knowing that God love and forgive you unconditionally? How does the basic message “You are loved, forgiven, and free.” Enable you to live a changed life in the world?

OR

Revisit the chapter’s discussion of Luther’s experiences with authorities in the section “Concerning Governing Authorities” (pp. 189-192). Revisit especially the reasons why and ways that Luther rebelled against authorities in his day (the first four paragraphs), as well as the last paragraph on citizenship as “a rich way to live out Christian faith” (p. 192).

Question: How do you see citizenship in your own context as a way to live out your Christian faith? Where do Luther’s example and teachings resonate most with your own life experience in society today?

(due one week before the May session – May 2)

Express your understanding of Luther's concept of vocation using your current occupation/situation as a reference. Reflect on your current occupation as vocation. In what ways is your faith and Lutheran identity expressed in that vocation on a daily basis? In what ways could your faith and Lutheran identity be more fully expressed in that vocation? Are there aspects of your occupation that conflict with your faith and Lutheran identity? How do you handle those dissonances? Organize your thoughts in one to three pages.

Final Assignment
(due by June 13)

The ability to express your faith/Lutheran identity succinctly. You never know when someone is going to ask you what it means to be a Lutheran or what you believe. Often you will not have much time to tell them and they probably don't want to read a lengthy email or paper. That's why it is important to have an "elevator speech" – a short description that captures the most significant concepts and their significance/benefit to you. Your assignment is to write such an elevator speech about what it means to be a Lutheran. Then make a video of yourself delivering it (your phone will make a fine video camera). Email those videos and the written script to me and I will collect them and distribute them to the class via my YouTube channel.