

Sermon on John 8:31-36
Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I almost did not come to America this year. I know this comes as a surprise to you Lutherans, as I have visited your church in St. Paul EVERY YEAR on Reformation Sunday, to preach the gospel. I have greatly enjoyed this pulpit exchange with your Pastor Erlandson, while he preaches in Wittenberg, Germany.

But to tell you the truth, this year I almost come. First of all, there was the “Muslim ban” declared by your new president and his administration. It made travel to America so much more difficult for people. It was so outrageous to single out people because of their religion, that I preferred to stay home. But your pastor convinced me – seeing it is the 500th anniversary of the reformation of 1517. He thought you Lutherans needed a little “pep talk” from the gospel of Jesus Christ, as you face the challenges of this world today – which are oddly similar to those I faced 500 years ago! But when I landed in Minnesota, I learned that my visa had expired a few centuries ago, which never had been a problem for me before, but I was delayed at customs. TSA officers took me aside and quizzed me about what was in my bag. I had to name ALL 95 theses! Some of them had never seen a real pretzel. But they liked them, and let me through - so now I’m here!

So here’s a little update for your Lutheran historical memory. Today we celebrate the “Reformation” because on October 31, 2017, the day before All Saints Day, I produced a pamphlet containing 95 Theses – a Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences”. This challenge to debate came to change the world – quite by accident, and not by design. You see, I was an Augustinian monk, minding my own business in Wittenberg, teaching Hebrew scriptures and preaching several times a week in the local Roman Catholic church, when John Tetzel came to town. You know the story, I think. Pope Leo the Tenth had a building project going on in Rome, building the Basilica of St. Peter, first bishop of Rome. He needed money, because it was a very big, expensive project. So he sent out John Tetzel and others out to raise money. They did it by selling indulgences – pieces of paper signed by Rome, by which ordinary human beings could purchase forgiveness of sins and time off from purgatory after they died. People lined up to buy them, for the sake of their dead relatives (or themselves). It was a great fundraising scheme!

I smelled a scam, as soon as Tetzel came into town. Long story short, I wrote 95 Theses – 95 reasons why I thought the whole theological basis for this

scheme was wrong – in Latin – and sent it off to the archbishop. My mistake was to post my pamphlet in town. Someone got a hold of it, translated it into German, and printed it on Johan Gutenberg’s printing press, and soon most of Saxony had read it! It went viral – as you Americans say on social media – like 95 Tweets! Soon my name became a household word in Germany, and I was in big trouble with the Pope! He was so mad. He called it “fake theology!” You know the rest of the story. Eventually I was summoned to the Diet of Wurms where I was asked, in front of Emperor Charles V to “recant” what I had said. After a sleepless night, I returned to say “Unless you can convince me, by reason or by authority of scripture, of the error of my words, I will not, and shall not, recant. God help me.”

I could have been burned at the stake as a heretic, for opposing Rome so publicly. But fortunately, I had Frederick the Wise’ order of protection. I hid for months in Wartburg Castle, where I translated the whole New Testament from Latin into German, for everyone to read. But most of you know all of that. The point is, I survived. Now the Bible has been translated into almost every language spoken on earth, so that every human being who can read can hear the gospel for themselves. This is the true “Freedom of the Christian” – to understand for ourselves how God, out of love, has sent Jesus Christ to die for us, and to set us free from sin and death, a freedom we ascertain through faith and trust in Christ Jesus. *”Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, we are now justified by God’s grace, as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ...for a person is justified by faith, apart from works, prescribed by the law!”* This made the sale of indulgences, and good works, as a way to salvation null and void, according to scripture. I didn’t make this up! And the Pope knew it! You can read it in the gospels, and the Apostle Paul wrote these very words in his letter to the Romans, which you have heard today!

Again, I had no idea how revolutionary these words were. They transformed the lives and the faith of many for generations to come. They also caused much division in the Church, and years of warfare, to my lasting regret. Not until 1962, with Vatican II, did the Church address the abuses I saw in my lifetime, taking away many of the differences Lutheran and Catholic Christians have had for almost 500 years. (The Church moves slowly.) So I am very pleased that one year ago in Lund, Sweden, Pope Francis met with Lutheran leaders to declare an end to our inter-church conflict, commemorate the Reformation together, and bless our road to eventual communion. We recognize that what unites us is greater than what divides us, and we confess our past conflicts. Through faith, we recognize that through faith in Jesus Christ, and in our baptism, we are called by God as Lutherans and Catholics into one body of Christ.

We also recognize that in baptism we are all called into one body through faith. But in these days of violence and warfare throughout the world, we are

called as people of faith – Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Christians of all denominations, with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and all who declare faith in God, to stand united against violence – against women, refugees and all victims of warfare, and against racism, poverty, and all that oppresses or victimizes human beings throughout the world. Indeed, as Lutherans and Catholics, one of the imperatives of our faith in God is to witness together – with all faiths – to the mercy of God in our words and our service to the world. Which means we must stand united in love for our neighbors, to help our neighbors in Puerto Rico who suffer from the damage from hurricanes, to bring peace to our brothers and sisters in Syria, Iraq, and throughout the Middle East who suffer from civil war and religious hatred, to end human trafficking and slavery throughout the world, and come to the aid of those who suffer from drought and hunger in Africa. We also stand united in faith against military and economic oppression, graft and corruption, which creates such a gap between those who experience wealth and poverty, whether it's in other countries or in the United States of America.

In my lifetime, I have always sought the truth of God and to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. It is my duty as a Christian preacher to expose what is false, and to proclaim the good news of God's truth. For as we heard in today's gospel, *"If you continue in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."* Jesus' first hearers protested that they had never been slaves to anyone – forgetting that once their people had been slaves in Egypt under Pharaoh, and at that time were occupied by the Roman army. But Jesus said to them, *"Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."*

Brothers and sisters: in baptism you and I have been set free from sin by God in Christ Jesus. But we are not completely free from sin, so long as we deny freedom to our neighbors, whom we are called to love. In this nation, those who are "citizens" are given full civil rights of freedom, including the right to vote, and many protections by law. But many of our neighbors do not enjoy such freedom.

Many have come here as immigrants, seeking a better life, but without documentation. Many were invited to come by industry to work in factories, or by farmers to work in their fields. We call them "undocumented" – because they do not have legal status here. We do not call them "illegal" – because NO HUMAN BEING is illegal. They are children of God.

We know about slavery in America, one of our marks of shame. There were many who were forced to come here against their will, to work as slaves, but were made free after a great Civil War. But the promise of freedom is still a struggle. There are too many today who are treated or abused like slaves today in America. Some are abused because they are young, female and male, and are taken

advantage of by men who control them for money. Others are abused because they are migrant workers who lack documentation, and do not “have a permanent place” in this country. This is our nation’s sin and shame, because it falls short of our ideals as “the land of the free and the home of the brave”.

In March of this year, our brother, Michael came to us as one of those undocumented persons. He came years ago with a work visa, which permitted him to work as an engineer. One day his visa expired, after our nation’s Immigration enforcement division, known as ICE, became more assertive in seeking those without proper documents. Michael came to us in fear, because he was not free, and was in danger of being deported. We were able to provide him a safe place to stay until his documents were renewed in September. The result is that Michael is temporarily free from fear of deportation, but he does not have a permanent place in this country. He must renew his work visa every year, or seek citizenship – which is a long process, taking years, if it even happens.

But now Michael is our brother in Christ at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer. He is baptized as a child of God, wonderfully created, a human being in the image of God. He has become one of us by affirmation of faith, as a member of this Church. In our eyes, Michael is as free as any one of us, regardless of citizenship, or visa, or lack of documentation. In God’s eyes, Michael is one of us: he continues in God’s Word, he has heard and known the truth of God, and the truth has set him free. One day the state will follow – which is our job, as citizens!

So brothers and sisters, we have much work to do! We know that we are free from our sins by the salvation of Jesus Christ. We know that we are united by faith with our sisters and brothers who are Roman Catholic, other Christians, even those of other faiths, and by our compassion for all human beings. The abundance of this land is not shared by every human being in this nation. Poverty and hunger are widespread. People of color are imprisoned at an alarming rate. Immigrants are mistreated, detained and deported. Millions of refugees are left to languish in refugee camps all over the world, unwanted, without hope. It is our sin to tolerate such lack of compassion. It is our mission as Christians to join with other people of faith throughout the world to bring mercy, justice and compassion to all people – when mercy seems to have been a forgotten concept these days.

For if our neighbor suffers and is not free, how can you and I be free? The truth is, unless all are free, no one is truly free. But the good news is, *“If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”* Perhaps we still have to learn that when all people are free, then we will also be free! God’s call today may be for us to learn that the truth of God is love. And so Jesus promises, *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* Thanks be to God. Amen.