

Sermon on John 8:31-36 & Romans 3:19-28
Reformation Sunday, October 27, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson/aka Martin Luther

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My name is Martin Luther. Once again it is my great pleasure to be invited to preach from your pulpit while your pastor preaches in the Castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, an exchange of pulpits that has continued for over 17 years here. That's a long time! Some of you have wondered when and if your pastor will ever retire from the ministry of Word and Sacrament – well, I give you my example of over 500 years of preaching and teaching since I was born in 1483 and began teaching and preaching in 1511, and though my earthly life ended in 1546, for some reason known only to God and not by me, my words and influence continue even today. I guess I'm not dead yet, and my work is not yet finished! Neither is yours, sisters and brothers! For you live in tumultuous times in America, for the Church and for the world God has made, not unlike the times into which I was born in the 16th century. The Reformation set off a firestorm of conscience and faith that has not gone out, thanks be to God!

So as I traveled to the United States on Friday, I stopped for a layover at the Thurgood Marshall International Airport in Baltimore, and watched the funeral service broadcast on national television for U.S. Representative Elijah Cummings. As an Old Testament professor, I was intrigued by his name, for the prophet Elijah! Though I wasn't invited to preach, there were many fine eulogies spoken by former presidents, secretaries of state, congressional staff and colleagues, Cumming's two daughters and his wife. They lifted up the congressman's devotion to social justice, compassion, dignity and respect for others, no matter which side of the congressional aisle.

Elijah Cummings was also known for a poem he recited the day he was sworn in for the House of Representatives, which he referred to often throughout his public life and in it so many have found inspiration. It is a short 46-word poem by African American educator, civil rights activist, advisor to U.S. presidents and minister of the gospel, Benjamin E. Mays:

I've only just a minute, only sixty seconds in it.

Forced upon me, can't refuse it, didn't seek it, didn't choose it.

But it's up to me to use it.

I must suffer if I lose it, give an account if I abuse it.

Just a tiny little minute, but eternity is in it.

The funeral lasted several hours, not a tiny minute, but the inspiration was worth it. Especially for the sermon by Bishop Walter Thomas, who told of the value Elijah Cummings placed on weekly worship in New Psalmist Baptist Church – as a time when he, as well as each one of us, is reminded of his (and our) human failings and our God-given possibilities and callings – to love your neighbor and do justice and mercy in the world. It reminded me of my teaching that we are all simultaneously sinners and saints! So in worship today, you confessed your sins, how you and I have failed to live as Jesus’ disciples, and received the promise of mercy and forgiveness of sins because of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead, giving you and me new life here on earth and in eternity in heaven! This is the truth of God: *“Since all have sinned and fall short of god’s glory, they are now justified by God’s grace as a gift, effective through faith! You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free!”*

For 500 years it seems that Martin Luther and the heritage of the whole Reformation is encapsulated into one brief shining moment in time, a tiny little minute, when according to legend, I nailed 95 Thesis of critique, inviting debate for the Church in my day. I will have you know that I wrote much more than 95 Theses – I wrote words filling 55 volumes of hard-cover printed words, I preached thousands of sermons, sang hundreds of hymns, and the Reformation continued on for decades of controversy and continues to be reformed today, rocked by countless forces, forever changing – “just a tiny little minute, but eternity is in it”!

So I want to tell you how I see the challenge for the Church today – as it is not essentially different from the one I faced 500 years ago! When I was serving as a professor of Old Testament at Wittenberg University, I became aware of the failings of church leadership and our rulers to care for the people – or even to see them! People were suffering from poverty and hunger, but mostly from a lack of hope in God or in the future. Their rulers lorded it over them, taxing the people heavily and forcing them to work the land – with most of the benefits going to the elite, who lived in castles and had powerful forces to protect them. The Church didn’t help at all. Clergy painted a picture of God as judge, who condemns sinners for our failures, requiring penance. The hierarchy lived like royalty, putting resources into beautifying cathedrals instead of caring for the poor and needy. I was outraged when the Church decided to raise funds for the building of the Church of St. Peter in Rome by taxing the faithful throughout the Holy Roman Empire. When hucksters like Johannes Tetzel showed up in towns throughout Germany to sell “indulgences” – legal papers selling forgiveness of sins for one’s deceased loved ones in purgatory – I just lost it. I wrote 95 points of debate showing how the Church had crossed the line, and dared the Church to prove me wrong by issuing a challenge to debate over scripture. But with the invention of the printing press, these 95 Theses got into the hands of the faithful all over the

empire, and then it all hit the fan, I guess! You know the story – at least the story from the Lutheran point of view, so I won't bore you by retelling it. I was surprised at how violent the reaction was – my life was in danger, because I dared protest! But I will share some of my points that were most offensive to the powers that be in the Church, because you might find similarities today, such as:

“It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased, but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone.

Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.

Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the Church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.

Christians are to be taught that the clergy does not intend that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy.

Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.

Because love grows by works of love, humans thereby become better. One does not, however, become better by means of indulgences but is merely freed from penalties.

Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy human and passes by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy forgiveness but God's wrath.

Again, why doesn't the pope (or evangelist Joel Osteen), whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest billionaire, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?”

Well, that did it. With this direct challenge to the Church leadership, the die was cast, and my future as a “rebel reformer of the Church” who was destined to be cast out was assured. I would not live to see reconciliation. But thanks be to God that over the years there has been some reconciliation, and two years ago on Reformation Day 2016 Pope Francis and leaders of the Lutheran World Federation gathered to worship in the Lutheran Cathedral in Lund, Sweden, to commemorate the 500 year anniversary of the Reformation. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears, I wouldn't have believed this possible, but thanks be to God! There is no more time for the Church to be divided, when humans face so many challenges, suffering and strife. We may have but a few tiny minutes left, and eternity is in it, so let's come together and bear witness to God's love!

So I know that you are facing great challenges and division today in America – we hear all about it in Germany! At the same time, Christian faith, worship attendance and the influence of the Church declines throughout the world. The Church is criticized from the outside for being judgmental and supporting the

present political leadership that cares little for the suffering poor. Some ministers of mega churches enjoy lavish lifestyles and live in luxurious mansions – when millions live in poverty or in prison, are homeless and hungry. Five hundred years after the Reformation of 1517, it looks like you need a new reformation of the Church and society in America today! People need to hear the truth, when they have followed false voices, and heard too many lies from their leaders. For the truth of God’s mercy and love for all in Christ Jesus, will set you free! This is the good news that Christ calls you and me to share!

So I was encouraged to hear in August how, at your Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee, 900 voting members made some bold resolutions to address fundamental challenges facing humankind today (as well as the Church)! Your Church gave an apology to American people of African descent, for the sin of slavery and the continued racism and injustice that has afflicted society to this day, effecting every person of color in America. You celebrated 40 years of the ordination of women in your Lutheran Church! You condemned the sin of white supremacy as idolatry, and declared June 17 a day of repentance for the martyrdom of nine members of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, who were shot and killed at bible study by a young white man, filled with hate, who was confirmed in a Lutheran church. The world witnessed the work of the Holy Spirit in leading the assembly to address our nation’s inhumanity toward immigrants, undocumented migrants and asylum seekers at our southern border by declaring the ELCA a sanctuary church, which cares for immigrants and refugees from all over the world. I close by sharing 9.5 Theses written for a public march in Milwaukee from the Churchwide Assembly to the offices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (also known as ICE), and taped to the ICE office door. I am honored that these 9.5 Theses were written and inspired by my original 95 Theses back in 1517! For it was due for a rewrite in your time and place! This new version is titled *“I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me.”*

- 1) *When our Lord Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Matt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. (95 Theses #1) We repent of our silence, indifference, and lack of courage as our nation separates immigrant families, inflicts misery on migrant children, and turns away refugees.*
- 2) *Christians are to be taught that a person who welcomes the immigrant stranger with compassion and an open heart has opened their heart not only to the stranger but also to Christ. (Matt 25:35)*
- 3) *Christians do well to remember that God’s love, mercy, and grace extend equally to all peoples from every nation and place on earth. (Rev 7:9)*

- 4) *Christians do well to remember that their own ancestral journeys as they consider the harsh journeys of immigrants in our day. “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut 10:19)*
- 5) *Christians are to be taught that immigrant laws and policies are to be measured against the higher law of love. “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5:14)*
- 6) *Christians do well to welcome immigrants and refugees equally as citizens and members of God’s family. “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you.” (Leviticus 19:34)*
- 7) *Preaching and teaching the gospel Way of Jesus must include condemnation of human cruelties and social injustices. “Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, ‘Peace, peace,’ and there is no peace! (Jeremiah 6:14). (95 Theses #92)*
- 8) *Christians are to be taught that when the laws of our government violate our faith and our conscience, “we must obey god rather than any human authority.” (Acts 5:29)*
- 9) *We firmly believe that the treatment of children and families at our borders is a moral issue, not a political one. The well-being and safety of children, including ensuring family unity and reunification, must be a priority. Therefore we commit ourselves to an ongoing struggle for just immigration policies...From the Greater Milwaukee Synod Refugee and Immigration Committee.*

This is most certainly true. May the Church say “Amen.”