

Sermon on Psalm 46 & John 8:31-36
Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Grace and peace to you in the name of God, the Creator and our solid Rock, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit who helps us and is always present with us. I come bearing good news to you from the Word of God, the words of Psalm 46: *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved, and though the mountains shake in the depths of the sea; though its waters rage and foam, and though the mountains tremble with its tumult...For the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.*”

I am grateful to you and your Pastor for having invited me to preach once again here at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, when so much of note is happening here, in your city, your nation, and across the world. You have an important national election campaign going on in this United States, there is warfare and suffering in Iraq and in Syria, and there are protests happening in North Dakota (of all places), where the Great Sioux Nation and its allies are attempting to stop the building of a pipeline to pump crude oil through the sacred graves of their ancestors and under the Missouri River. Your pastor is in Lund, Sweden today, with the Lutheran World Federation for the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation of 1517, in a service of Common Prayer being held tomorrow morning. Pope Francis himself is there – which I personally thought would never happen until hell froze over or Jesus Christ returned! Because the Church has been divided since that day 499 years ago, when I nailed 95 Theses for debate on that Church door in Wittenberg, Germany – on All Saints’ Eve in 1517 – a day you celebrate as “Halloween” - All Hallowed Ev’en, or All Souls Day, or may also call Reformation Day. It was perhaps the first “public protest” in the history of the Church, and the only one that you Lutherans so passionately celebrate! I admit that on that day I got a bit carried away in my arguments with the Church and its leader, Pope Leo X. I could have been more kind and concise, or had one topic for debate in my “*Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*” (that is, to pay a donation to the Church for the forgiveness of sins and the release of souls from a fictitious place called Purgatory) or simply stopped at the number 10 (like the 10 commandments!). But, no, I had to keep right on going, writing 95 issues to argue with the Church, so that no one can remember anymore what all the fuss was about! But I admit that I started this whole mess with my big mouth, and my pen! With mere “words” you say?!

At first I thought it was enough to write out my theses on one piece of paper and nail it to one church's door (or so the legend goes!). Actually, I only posted it as an invitation for open debate, mailed a copy to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, who sent it on to Pope Leo because he reeked of heresy. But then somebody else got a hold of it who owned a new invention called Gutenberg's Printing Press, made copies, and soon these 95 theses spread like a virus all throughout Germany, the Holy Roman Empire! This is how the Reformation went viral – to use a word commonly used today in your world, I understand! Through the printed word!

Again, it is amazing to me how quickly my 95 words spread, all because of that Gutenberg printing press and movable type. This gave me the idea to also print posters on which I could write each of the 10 Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, all with my own explanations! Before long, my posters were on the walls of homes throughout Germany. The Pope's minions were green with envy! Then I put them all together, to make the *Small Catechism*, printed into small booklets that could fit in your pocket! This idea was *huge*, it was *genius*! This is a book that many of you know – perhaps you still have your *Small Catechism* at home – or maybe you have it with you in your pocket! If you do, I will autograph it for you today, after worship!

Which reminds me – there is an even better way to get your own Small Catechism today - off the internet! It's a free app, which you can download for free right onto your smart phone! Knowing how fascinated I am with technology – I downloaded it just this morning when I got off the plane! You can do it right now! Take out your smart phone, and “google” Luther's small catechism on Google Play. You'll find it under apps – I have the one by Augsburg Fortress, with the maroon colored icon. You can download and install it right now – don't worry, it's free! There.....do you have it? You can play with it after worship, in your spare time – look up all of the commandments, the creed, the Lord's Prayer, the sacraments, confession and other prayers. So, if I see you on your smart phone today during worship, *you had better be reading your Small Catechism!* Ushers – I'd like you to enforce this rule today! Okay? Thank you!

Now, where were we? Oh, yes, I was just about to preach the gospel – the good news of God in Christ Jesus – which is my primary task! Today we read in God's Word from the gospel according to John: For as Jesus said to those who believed in him, “*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*” These words are as important today in these difficult days as they were for the Reformation 500 years ago! The response of people to Jesus when he first said them was “We have never been slaves! We are children of Abraham! What do you mean ‘we will be made free?’” They were forgetting the fact that they were all living in an occupied nation, oppressed by the Romans! At the time of the Reformation, we Christians

were once more enslaved by an oppressive system under the Church - which we had created – that kept us in bondage to all the rules we had set up. We had made an “idol” of the Church and its authority under a very human pope, and bound God’s Word to the interpretation of the Church’s authorities and its scholars. But by reading Paul’s letter to the Romans, I discovered the truth:

“But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believed. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” (Romans 3:21-28)

These words hit me like a lightning bolt from heaven, when I finally understood! God’s Word comes to us in order to set us free, not to bind us with regulations. Its purpose is to set us free from sin against God and one another, and free us to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. Which is our great problem – freeing ourselves from fear in order to love others. You could see it clearly back in Reformation Days – when prophets were burned at the stake as heretics, and we fought bloody wars in the name of religion – Protestant Christians against Roman Catholic Christians in those days.

It sounds much like the great problem we see today in this world: violence, terror and wars fought in the name of religion – mostly by Christian and Muslim extremists. There are also those great divides between people by poverty and wealth, often caused by racism, fear, and greed. Some suggest that we build walls between us and arm ourselves for protection, when we should be building bridges and shaking hands. Corporations and politicians are making money off of the fears they are spreading, because there are profits to be made from misunderstanding and fear. Some think that fear is their path to power! I know – I saw this first hand during the days of the Protestant Reformation in Germany.

If I were to write 95 Theses today I would have no problem finding enough issues to write about! You all really have “issues” in America today! I think you know that – just look at the election rhetoric you are suffering through, on the fear of immigrants, violence against women, and hate speech made normal! I could continue to write about our present day “indulgences” – how we think perhaps we can “buy” the love of God or the forgiveness of our sins through “good works” or financial donations to the Church – when these gifts of God are truly *free!* Also, I think the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* today is not to any Pope, but rather, our bondage to the image we have of the church and some America of the past, which never truly existed except in our imaginations – and our inability to embrace the freedom that we are offered through Christ, or dare to change in the Church!

But I would focus my energy on the most dangerous of our sins today, which have their origins in fear of the future and of people around us who are “different” from us. These fears are expressed in words and acts of hate or misunderstanding, throughout our history and repeated tragically today. They rise out of racism and white privilege, seeking to hold on to power, wealth and control in a world that seems to us most threatening, which is our American form of idolatry. It comes out of our lack of faith in the God of abundance – leading to our myths of scarcity, and our fear of the world around us, instead of faith in the God who loves us, and cares for us in times of danger. Idolatry leads us to rely on coal, fossil fuels, and pipelines of oil for salvation, instead of the sun, the wind, and the water to give us life! And fear of the other – of immigrants, of Muslims, of African Americans or of Native Americans – shows a lack of faith in the God who has created all human beings as sacred, and every person as a child of God. With such a God there is no room whatsoever for prejudice or fear.

If I, Martin Luther, were to post such 95 Theses for Debate in America today, where would I post them? I would post them on church doors in every congregation in America, where people of faith should consider our idolatries today and put our faith in the God who loves all people, justice and truth, and doesn't leave us mired in ignorance and fear. I would post them on the doors of our nation's Capitol, the Supreme Court, the White House, State Capitols and city halls where just and unjust laws are enacted and change is possible! I would post them on the doors of the Fourth Police Precinct in North Minneapolis, and police headquarters in Falcon Heights, in Ferguson, in Baltimore, Chicago, New York City, or any place where violence has led to people rising up to say “Black Lives Matter”. I would post them at the Sacred Stones camp near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, at the State Capitol in Bismarck, and on the fence where the North Dakota Access Pipeline is being built, digging a trench over sacred burial grounds for native peoples and under the Missouri River, threatening the drinking water of millions of children and future generations. I would post them where sheriffs' deputies from North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota (including Hennepin County) brutally arrested and mistreated nonviolent native water protectors and their allies this past week, making us look more like a police state in Russia or China or some other country, rather than the United States of America.

Yet with all these issues of tension and fear, we are people of hope. I have hope because tomorrow, after 500 years of division, Lutherans and Catholic people of faith will worship and pray in one place, *Together in Hope*. I have hope that people of faith in this country will come to our senses and move us from the fearful rhetoric of today's political campaigns, to a more constructive dialogue that will build community as well as bridges. I have hope that now that we have seen plainly the consequences of fear and racism against people of color – against

African Americans, Native peoples, Latinos and Asian Americans – that we will find a better way that builds understanding, equity and justice.

But most of all, I have hope because I have faith in the God of love, who sent our Lord Jesus Christ to lead us out of fear, bondage and sin, into a new world of freedom through faith, hope, and love for God and one another. I have faith because of the psalm we heard today, which proclaims that:

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.*

God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be shaken;

God shall help it at the break of day.

The nations rage, and the kingdoms shake; God speaks, and the earth melts away.

The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Come now, regard the works of the Lord,

what desolations God has brought upon the earth;

Behold the one who makes wars to cease in all the world;

who breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire.

Be still, then, and know that I am God;

I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth.”

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.”

Amen.

David Archambault said,

“We need our state and federal governments to bring justice and peace to our lands, not the force of armored vehicles. WE have repeatedly seen a disproportionate response from law enforcement to water protectors’ nonviolent exercise of their constitutional rights. Today we have witnessed people praying in peace, yet attacked with pepper spray, rubber bullets, sound and concussion cannons. We urge state and federal government agencies to give this tense situation their immediate and close attention.”

PRAYERS:

God our Protector, we pray for all people gathered near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota: for the native peoples gathered in solidarity to pray, for the water protectors and their allies, for the police, sheriffs, deputies and highway patrol, and for the pipeline workers. Keep them safe and warm, free from violence and anger. Help us to repent from the injustices of the past and the present, and lead us to resolve this conflict with understanding and justice.

Hear us, O God.

Look with favor on your people, Lord, we pray, and pour out upon them the gifts of your Spirit, that they may grow constantly in love of the truth and devote themselves with zeal to perfect unity among Christians, love for all people and understanding of all faiths. We pray for Pope Francis and for everyone gathered in Lund, Sweden for the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation.

Hear us, O God.