

Homily for Reformation Day Celebration 2010

Colleagues,

Five (or is it six?) small Lutheran congregations in rural southern Illinois gathered for a Reformation Day Festival last Sunday afternoon at St. John's, Bremen, IL. A signal of Bremen's modest size is that there's no longer a Post Office in town. These congregations, as I understand it, are linked into a unique sort of consortium in the Central-Southern Illinois Synod (ELCA) with two pastors who jointly carry out a circuit-rider sort of shepherding of these communities. As they were planning the event, apparently someone told someone – and I was invited to be the proclaimer. I accepted. The order of service was Luther's Deutsche Messe [The German Mass—in English, of course].

After the liturgical festivity, there was, of course, a potluck supper. The cuisine prepared by “the ladies” of mostly German-heritage went far beyond what Garrison Keillor describes coming from the Norwegian Lutherans in Lake Wobegon. And the highlight of the entertainment was Marie Schroeder's story—a true story—about the ham served at another southern Illinois Lutheran church. The former pastor of that church himself had told it to us.

In a similarly small town it was the custom at the local Lutheran church that after funerals there was a meal prepared by the congregation's Ladies Aid Society. The tradition went like this: For the ham that was always the entree, it was “free” if the deceased was a woman who had been a member of the society. It was also free if the deceased was a man whose wife was a society member. If neither of these pertained, the family was asked to contribute \$25 for the ham.

On one such occasion, the deceased woman was not a society member. After the meal the husband came to the society officers offering a check for \$100 to cover the fee for his wife "and me too when I die." "That check created great consternation for the society members," the pastor told us. "For days they debated whether or not to accept it, for 'who knows what the price of ham will be when this man dies?'"

Now to the serious stuff.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Biblical texts for the day were the regular ones for Reformation Day:

Jeremiah 31:27-34, Romans 1:19-28 and John 8:31-36.

Luther's world 500 years ago was very different from ours. No electricity. Can you even imagine your life with no electricity? No aspirin. No pills of any kind. No x-ray machines. Can you imagine . . . No gasoline. No cars. No concrete. Can you imagine . . . And of course with no electricity, no TV, no internet, no cell phone. A "no" to most all the "stuff" that is "normal" for us.

But his world was also very much the same as ours: The church was in a mess. Politics were a jungle. And also this: Muslim armies from Turkey had made their way into Europe all the way to Vienna. That means they were as close to Luther's home town as from here to Chicago. And even closer to each German citizen—as it still is for each of us here today – was the internal compulsion to be "right," and to document that whenever it was challenged.

And what does Luther do? Lots and lot of things, as we all know. Today is the actual date (Oct. 31) when he put his famous 95 theses out on the bulletin board in Wittenberg. The year was 1517. Seven years from now that'll be 500 years. There's more than one Reformation Day sermon right there in those theses.

But the one thing we want to look at today is this: What does he do in the middle of all that chaos? In the same year 1529 when he writes his essay "On War Against the Turks," he writes the hymn A Mighty Fortress is Our God. The melody was original with him, though he took the words from Psalm 46, which we just sang a few minutes ago. One thing he added to the Psalm 46 text was the very lively presence of the devil. Which was for him not some impish Halloween character, but real and experienced encounter with destructive powers opposing us over which we have no control. Your and my life too in our so-called modern world knows about such forces working against us—and nothing we can do will make them go away. Luther learned the Bible's own labels for this seemingly personified opponent: the destroyer/wrecker (diabolos), the accuser (Satan) and the liar (super-deceiver).

Luther put those Psalm words into German for Christians of his day to sing when everything is in a mess, when everything is up for grabs, when the super-wrecker, super-accuser, super-liar comes on the scene.

Its a good hymn for us. Your and my world—even with gasoline, TV, internet, text-messages and super high-tech medicine – is still in a mess. Church mess, political mess, economic mess—world-wide mess. And even closer to home, there are some messes inside each of us too. Which regularly when the super-opponent in any of his guises confronts us.

But before we go to that hymn, we should not forget what we've already heard in those three readings from the Bible, Jeremiah,

Romans and John's Gospel. There is a Big word in each of those readings. They all start with "F." But none of them is a dirty word. Just the opposite.

Jeremiah tells of God's New Covenant, God's new deal, to come someday when God "will forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more." Big word FORGIVENESS. Sinners get forgiven. That big day came when Jesus came.

Reading from Romans. Big word FAITH. The nickel word for FAITH is TRUST—not first of all something you believe in your head, but something you hang your heart on. FAITH, says St. Paul, is the answer to the BIG question: How do you live your life RIGHT? How do you get to be "right"? Aka "righteous." How do you get to be OK? Finally, OK with God? The sensible way, so it seems, is to start doing right stuff. Shape up!—obey God's law—all of it, the whole shebang. When you do the right thing, you become a right gal, a right guy. RIGHT? But of course it never works. Says Paul: "All fall short." Nobody ever makes it to the finish line "right."

Just check yourself by the first commandment. "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your mind, all the time." Who in this gathering—preacher included—has done that "all the time" this past week? Who has done that just since breakfast?

Thank God, there's that New Deal that Jeremiah was talking about. And Jesus is the center of it. For folks who always "fall short" "they are now OK by God's kindness as a freebie through the redemption [big word for "bring 'em back home"] that is in Christ Jesus." When sinners trust Jesus, they are OK with God—no matter what a mess they are, no matter how much baggage they carry, no matter what the wrecker, accuser, liar may be doing or saying to them. Listen again to Paul's last sentence: "We hold that a person is OK with God by faith—by trusting Jesus' word of

forgiveness—and not by our track record according to the law.”

That leads to our third reading where the word is FREEDOM. “If God’s Son, Jesus, makes you FREE—free from all that mess, free from all that baggage—YOU ARE REALLY FREE!” There is no freedom that can beat that.

OK, let’s take these three big words—FORGIVENESS, FAITH, FREEDOM and walk/talk our way through those four verses of A Mighty Fortress. I’ll use the translation I memorized in parochial school 70 yrs ago.

“A mighty fortress is our God, A trusty shield and weapon;
He helps us free from every need That hath us now o’ertaken.”

When the world at large, when your own “little” world is a mess, where do you run for help? People always run to whatever their heart is hanging on, whoever their god is. OUR God is the one who sent Jesus. That’s where we hang our hearts. And if today (again) your heart and mine were hanging somewhere else, then let that one go and hang your heart here.

Here is where the FORGIVENESS word comes from “every need.” The biggest NEED we all have is to be right. FORGIVENESS is God’s weird way to make wrong people right—to get sinners un-sinned. [A Lutheran pastor I know tells it this way: Some people say sex is the most powerful drive in people. I don’t think so. Instead it is the drive in all of us to be “right.” If you don’t believe that, just get married.] FORGIVENESS is God’s new deal to make wrong people right. Lutherans included.

“The old evil foe Now means us deadly woe;
Deep guile and great might Are his dread arms in fight,
On earth is not his equal.”

“It IS a jungle out there, Jane!” Behind the bigger and smaller stuff that’s coming at us is God’s own enemy, still running around messing up God’s world, messing up us too—wrecker, accuser, liar. Apart from God and God’s beloved son there is no power “equal” to cope with that enemy.

“With might of ours can naught be done – Our loss were soon effected.”

If we try on our own to cope with the super-messer behind the messes, we’re guaranteed losers. But Christ-trusters aren’t “on their own.” We are actually “owned” by Someone Else. That’s what St. Paul’s word “redemption” is all about: God regaining ownership of folks owned by someone else, some “other” god. Listen to the next lines.

“But for us fights the valiant One, Whom God himself elected.
Ask ye who is this? Jesus Christ it is,
The Lord Sabaoth, There is no other God;
He holds the field forever.”

He holds the field. That’s not a corn field or soybean field. It’s battlefield, our battlefield. Christ is the winner in the battlefield—our own person battlefields—ever since Easter. If He can lick death, he can lick anything. You name the mess, you call on his name, He makes you a survivor. Yes, there are “other gods,” but no other one who can conquer the super-adversary and then “hold the field forever.”

That’s where the FAITH word comes in. Where do you hang your heart day in, day out—and especially when your world is tumbling down? When you’re getting crucified yourself? God’s best offer is: Hang your heart here. On the one who came out alive on Easter. “It was a strange and dreadful fight, When Life and

Death contended. The victory remained with Life, the reign of Death was ended. His sting is lost forever. Hallelujah!"

The final two verses are about FREEDOM. They need very little commentary.

“Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us;

We tremble not. We fear no ill. – They shall not overpower us.

This world’s prince may still Scowl fierce as he will,

He can harm us none. He’s judged. The deed is done,

One little word can fell Him.”

Lutheran folks have often wondered what Luthier had in mind with that last sentence. What is the “one little word” that dismisses the super-wrecker, super-accuser, super-liar? One of today’s best-known Lutherans in America is Martin Marty, a graduate of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis way back in 1952. With a twinkle in his eye Marty once said: “I think the one-little-word Luther had in mind is B00!” Meaning, “you don’t scare me anymore. I’m Christ-connected. So B00! Get out of here.” In Luther’s own life he often said that he recited two words when the super-enemy was getting at him. Two Latin words: Baptizatus sum. “I am baptized.” Which means “I’m connected to Christ So beat it. Get out of here.”

That’s real FREEDOM.

And now FREEDOM once more in the final verse—how you live your life day in day out.

“The Word they still shall let remain, Nor any thanks have for it;

He's by our side upon the plain, WITH His good gifts and Spirit."

Notice: THE WORD is a "he." Christ is the WORD of GOD Luther's talking about. Not the Bible, but God talking to us in the person and work of Jesus. That WORD is filled with these F-words. Word of FORGIVENESS, calling us to FAITH/TRUST in that Christ-message, from which comes FREEDOM like you've never seen it before.

Of course, there is always a "they" who thumb their noses at that WORD, give God no thanks for it. And we also get sucked in to joining the "they." But "they" are still losers, and so are we, when we hang our hearts somewhere else. Still this Christ sticks with us "upon the plain." In our "plain lives," here on the plains of southern Illinois. HE still remains. And as John's message says: "If you remain in my WORD—the WORD OF GOD that I AM—you will remain FREE." Free from here to eternity.

"And take they our life, Goods, fame, child and wife?
Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won,
The kingdom ours remaineth."

Even if "they" leave us in peace for a time, there comes a day when we finally do lose everything, when we take our last breath. Everything goes. Except for one thing: Our Christ-connection. That's what the Bible means with the term Kingdom of God. God's new regime, new way of dealing with sinners is to get the sinners Christ-connected. And with that Christ-connection come FORGIVENESS, FAITH, FREEDOM. That's what lasts. Since Christ has got death licked, he can lick anything. And he does.

God's way of being our KING—forgiveness, faith and freedom—lasts forever. And it's ours. The kingdom ours remaineth.

That's the real reason we're here to celebrate Reformation

Day—in Jesus' name. Amen.