

The Reformation. What was it all about?

Colleagues,

God willing, Marie and I will be out of the country when this week's ThTh gets to you. And next week's too. Costa Rica's the place. San Jose the town. We have a niece there, Heidi Michelsen, erstwhile Lutheran deaconess and now an M.Div. and ordained ELCA pastor. Heidi's husband Marco Ruiz is also a Lutheran pastor. Their team ministry in San Jose is not run of the mill. 'Fact is, we don't really know what it really is. So we're going to find out. On Heidi's invitation: "Uncle Ed, come down and do Crossings with us, and tell us something about Luther too." ThTh regulars know that for me that's just one request. But my Spanish is almost nil, despite the cramming Marie and I've been doing. [I may now just know enough to get for the bathroom—not unimportant for a septuagenarian male.] Just how "grande" is Heidi's request? Even though she has 15 presentation hours lined up (at last count), it'll really be only half that much talking-time for Tio Eduardo as she and Marco then interpret what uncle says. More when we get back, d.v., at the end of November. Therefore ThTh 284 and 285 were prepared in advance. They are the work of two co-confessors in the Crossings Community, neither of them from the clergy crowd.

This week's posting comes from a long-time ThTh receiver [hereafter LTTTR]. Seems his pastor, a solid pastor, Lutheran too, offered a Reformation Sunday sermon that discussed the shadow side of the Lutheran Reformation. Which is not to be denied. But apparently it got to be too much for LTTTR. Possibly even too much of the sermon. So he posted this note to his pastor with a blind copy to me. The grace of his prose is "grace abounding." I know it when I see it, 'cause I'm seldom graced

that way myself. As you regular readers know only too well.

In real life LTTTR is a corporation president. He's 54 years old, a Crossings aficionado from way back. I have his permission to pass his posting on to you. If I didn't think it was great, I wouldn't do that.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dear J. Thank you for having the courage and creativity to try to communicate the significance of Luther's theological revolution.

I continue to be animated by how we as a community of faith experience God's grace as tangible refreshment and nourishment in our lives today. I'm grateful that your sermons keep stirring the soup.

Here are my three thoughts about your comments on Sunday [= October 26, 2003, "Reformation Sunday" for Lutherans this year]:

- 1. The malady that kept Luther's contemporaries from experiencing God's grace – the whole merit system – is the operating principle for our world today. And we liberal, educated members of "X" Lutheran Church are part of that world. It's why we confess that "we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves."*
- 2. The insight of Luther and the Reformers was that there was only ONE doctrine or dogma: justification by faith alone. So we really don't have lots of creeds, and the Augsburg Confession is a practical explication of that*

single focus. As are the ecumenical creeds. Everything else is relative – and related to justification by faith. And for Lutherans, faith always has an object: Christ. And that faith is contrary to lots of really good evidence – including our own mortality and the creation-destroying effect of the “merit system.” One operation of God’s righteousness–his left-handed righteousness, as Luther would label it– was that sinners die and that creation gets its comeuppance, even gets handed over to chaos. [Ed: for example, that Los Angeles gets a foot of hail (sic!) in a “freak” storm a few days ago.] There is another kind of righteousness, of course, faith’s kind. About which more below.

For Luther, faith wasn’t intellectual assent or emotional will power, but rather a “having” or “hanging onto” Christ. By being literally connected – through baptism and eucharist – to Christ, we have confidence that the “alternative righteousness” is true for us. That, contrary to the evidence, God loves us, that death is trumped by resurrection. There is the “truth” about us that sets us free.

3. It’s probably another legend, but Luther supposedly said, “God rides the broken horse and carves the rotten wood.” It’s less apocryphal that Luther’s dying words were, “We are all beggars.” So it shouldn’t surprise us that Luther – simultaneously sinner and saint – was captivated by medieval concepts about Jews, witches, and peasants. Someday, historians will condemn us for driving cars or sending children to high schools. It’s not an excuse, but it is an explanation. And a reason to focus on the central, abiding contribution of the Reformation: justification by faith alone.

Well, this sounds way more preachy – and sketchy – than it felt

in my head, but I trust that your good nature can withstand yet another rambling parishoner. Thanks for listening.