

REFORMATION SUNDAY 2009

A sermon by Pastor Carol Jensen, st. John United Lutheran, Seattle

“God’s word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever.” So goes the opening line in the hymn we just sang as our gospel acclamation. The words to this hymn were written by Nicolai Grundtvig - the spiritual father of the happy Danes who set it to Martin Luther’s tune of *Ein Feste Bur*, the tune we most often associate with *A Mighty Fortress*. That opening sentence connects in my mind to the words of Jesus in our gospel reading this morning: “If you **continue** in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.”

Continue – the Greek word is *meno* and it can also be translated *remain* or *abide*. Continue or Abide in God’s word – what does that mean? It is not as clear cut as one might think.

Since the ELCA’s Churchwide Assembly in August and its decision to make room on the clergy roster for gay and lesbian clergy who are in lifelong partnerships, there are some in the ELCA who say that this decision means we as a denomination are no longer continuing in God’s word. The viewpoint I have heard and seen expressed by opponents of the ELCA’s decision is basically that God’s word is fixed. It doesn’t change and it is the same thing as the written words of the Bible. Therefore, to continue in God’s word means that the interpretation of scripture that held in the past must also hold now – though the proponents of this understanding of God’s word also have made some adaptations related to such things as women clergy or divorce.

While there is a certain appeal to this way of looking at God’s word, there is another way of understanding what it means to remain or continue in God’s word that speaks of a **living word**. In the words of Pastor Dan Erlander, in his now classic booklet *Baptized We Live*, God’s truth is the “living word which breaks into our lives, into our history, shattering old ways and creating new life, new values, and new commitments.”

On this Reformation Sunday, it is especially appropriate for us Lutherans to consider how Martin Luther came to understand what it meant to continue or abide in God’s word. He had grown up with and been educated in a certain way of interpreting scripture. When he read Paul’s words about the righteousness of God in his letter to the Romans, Luther initially understood that Paul was talking about God’s righteous anger at human sinfulness. Listen to Luther’s own words for a minute: “yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners... I was angry with God, and said, ‘As if it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the 10 Commandments, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!’ Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, ...I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. ...Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

Luther’s understanding of what the written word in the Bible meant CHANGED. He came to understand that the interpretation that he had grown up with and that he had learned at the university totally reversed the good news of the gospel. It made salvation a next to impossible goal to be achieved through one’s own merits and obscured the loving, gracious nature of God revealed through Jesus Christ. Luther came to the conclusion that all scripture needs to be viewed through the lens of Christ. To continue in God’s word for Luther then, was not to cling to the interpretations of the past if they subverted the gift of new life in Christ. Rather this meant letting the living word of God, which addresses us through scripture and preaching in interaction with our own situation, speak afresh.

Luther's insights and the actions that he and others took in light of these insights ended up precipitating what we call the Protestant Reformation. There is always the temptation when we celebrate the Reformation that we just look at it as just an event that happened almost 500 years ago. But – if we are true to our heritage from Luther - the reformation of the church is an ONGOING project. A Reforming Church enters into a fresh encounter with the scriptures again and again, letting God's living word speak to its members and to the world. If an interpretation of earlier times about slaves or women or gays stands in the way of the good news of the gospel of new life through Christ, then the church needs to struggle with the weighty task of reinterpretation, as Luther did. I am reminded of the words of one of my favorite hymns:

*The church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit led,
must claim and test it's heritage and keep on rising from the dead.*

That's a good hymn for us as we prepare to celebrate the 100th anniversary of this congregation next Sunday. If you look at the timeline that we will have posted on the wall downstairs – beginning with 3 separate congregations founded between 1909 and 1914 – and ending up with St. John United, now almost 9 years old – one theme that is a constant is change. One big change – at least when we look at the histories of Emmaus and St. John's - was the change from being a congregation whose mission focused on persons of a particular Scandinavian identity to being a congregation today that wants to welcome people from a wide range of backgrounds. St. Paul's which began as an English-speaking congregation, extended its ministry to the Ethiopian Oromo community for a period of time in the 1990's.

Certainly the two mergers – first St. John's and Emmaus to form St. John and then St. John and St. Paul's to form St. John United – were pretty big changes – especially for those of you who came to this building from a building that you probably loved, a place where children were baptized and confirmed, where husbands and wives were joined in marriage, where loved ones were laid to rest.

Other changes have come as we have sought to serve those in need in our community – especially the homeless and the hungry – and as we have begun to advocate on their behalf in the public square.

If we – the disciples of Jesus in this time and this place – are to continue in God's word – we must every so often stop and think about what this means. If there are attitudes or practices of the church that stand in the way of certain people hearing the good news, then, in the spirit of Martin Luther and the reformers, we need to ask ourselves – what might the Spirit be calling us to do about that? What can we do to better hear and understand the deepest questions and concerns of people in our neighborhoods and engage people on these concerns? This is what our bishop encouraged us to do at the Bishop's convocation last week. What can we do to make our Sunday worship more welcoming and understandable to people who do not know Jesus or who have felt alienated from the church? How do we best communicate in THIS time and place, as Luther did in his, the true word about God's incredible love and mercy?

The questions are good one for conversation in this year of our anniversary – for conversation shaped by scripture and our encounter with the living word of God, for conversation shaped by engagement with the world around us. As we continue the reforming of the church in our own small ways, we can be certain that God will continue to be faithful to us no matter what. We can trust that God's mercy is deep enough and wide enough to cover any of our mistakes and that the Spirit will lead us and guide us. Thanks be to God. Amen.