

REFORMATION SUNDAY | OCTOBER 25, 2020

JEREMIAH 31:31-34 | PSALM 46 | ROMANS 3:19-28 | JOHN 8:31-36

Psalms 46 uses two images to envision God's faithfulness. The first image is as an indestructible city. For the Israelites who first sang this psalm, the city of Zion, what we would call Jerusalem, was the seat of the divine presence. And there was no enemy, no natural disaster, no passage of time that could destroy the dwelling place of God. "Though the earth should change / though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea," the psalmist writes, the city of Zion will stand firm.

When Martin Luther wrote that famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress," this is the psalm and the image he was invoking. You can understand why those early reformers gravitated toward that image. They believed that the church was under attack. It was under the threat of what one of Luther's hymns called "deceit and sword," which is a coded way of saying the Pope and the Turks.¹ If you are hiding in a castle because people are trying to kill you, you want high ramparts and thick walls. Basically, you want a mighty fortress.

But in our contemporary American context, that image of God's faithfulness as an immovable, impermeable, indestructible object is probably less useful. What Luther and the reformers saw as a strength, we now understand to be weakness. After all, the mighty fortress Luther hid in is now more of a quaint museum. Times change. In a time of a world of religious pluralism, global migration, and rapidly evolving cultural norms, the idea of building something that will work in all times and places feels more arrogant than it does faithful.

Which is why the second image of this psalm might be more instructive and inspiring for us. The psalmist writes, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High." Faithfulness is not a fortress that can withstand attacks, but a river that brings joy and refreshment into the midst of God's people. The power of that image comes from the fact that rivers are dynamic. They're always changing. Unlike a castle that gets built and then landmarked and then stands as a marker of the past, rivers are always moving in new directions.

The river the psalmist describes doesn't start in Zion, but it ends there. That stream flows out of Eden, springs forth from a rock in the wilderness, washes Jesus's disciples, animates the Christian community, and flows all the way into what the author of Revelation calls the city of God. And the current of that river flows through each one of us.

For the past few years, I've taken Reformation Day to talk a little bit about this document entitled *From Conflict to Communion* which came out in 2017. Toward the end, it offers five ecumenical imperatives to norm our common life, and I've been reflecting on one each year. This year we're up to number three. So we are over halfway there, and I'm starting to think we might actually get through all five. Number three reads, "Catholics and Lutherans should again commit themselves to seek visible unity, to elaborate together what this means in concrete steps, and to strive repeatedly toward this goal."² We should strive repeatedly for visible unity.

Easier said than done. Sometimes the idea of church unity makes us nervous. Church unity means engaging other people, and once we start engaging other people it means giving up our ideas about them. It's easier to think in stereotypes than have to recognize people are complicated and

¹ "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" begins, "Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word; / Curb those who by deceit or sword / Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son / And bring to naught all He has done."

² Lutheran World Federation, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017). Full text at <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/From%20Conflict%20to%20Communion.pdf>

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nuanced like we are. Or maybe we worry that church unity means giving up our own identity. It means watering down who we are. You start pursuing church unity and pretty soon the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America becomes the Vaguely Monotheistic Club of the North American Free Trade zone. Or maybe we avoid seeking church unity because it just seems unnecessary. It's a fine hobby but not something we should make a priority. Shouldn't we spend more time doing things that affect our community?

When church unity makes us nervous or strikes us as irrelevant, it's usually because we're thinking of the church as a fortress. And if your goal is to preserve whatever's in the fortress then, sure, church unity doesn't make a lot of sense. It means making the walls thinner or passing meaningless statements about which pile of bricks is on good terms with the other piles of bricks.

That's why that river imagery can be so helpful to us. Because unity is an active, dynamic process. It's something that exists in our relationships with one another. Church unity doesn't mean we become like one another but that we recognize the gifts inherent in each of our expressions. It doesn't mean we all start from the same place, God knows we don't, but that we're all headed in the same direction. There is one river that flows through the city of God, but that river has many tributaries.

That river is what we're all a part of. That river is wide. It includes Lutherans and Catholics, Reformed and Presbyterians, Pentecostals and non-denoms, members of the AME and Methodists, Orthodox and UCC folks. That river is deep. It includes our synodical and churchwide ministries. Cross Roads Camp. LEAMNJ. Lutheran World Relief. Lutheran Disaster Response. It includes our partners who share our mission under different names. The Love Fund. St. Matthew Trinity Lunchtime Ministry. Any of the number of organizations whose work we support. And that river is long. It includes all those who have come before us. That first generation of reformers, sure, but everyone who has charted the course of our common life. And it includes everyone who will come after us. Everyone who will be enriched and enlivened by our work and witness.

And here's the fun bank shot of that river image. The people we pursue church unity with are not just our Catholic and Reformed and Methodist contemporaries down the street. We pursue unity with the people who came before us. As *From Conflict to Communion* puts it, we "disclos[e] afresh to fellow members the understanding of the gospel and the Christian faith as well as previous church traditions." We seek to understand the success, desires, and shortcomings of the people who came before us. When we speak honestly about the shortcomings of that first generation of reformers, their anti-Semitism, their overly simplistic views on political authority³, and their ignorance of other faiths⁴, we're not doing it to congratulate ourselves for being so much more advanced than people who lived five hundred years ago. We're trying to come to terms with the legacy we've been given.

And it goes the other way, too. We seek unity with the people who live downstream. When we make decisions, we don't just say, *What will make this problem go away for me in the next five minutes?* We say, *How will this affect people in the decades to come?* We invest time and effort and resources in people who will receive the legacy we pass on. That unity is a constant practice we work on together.

³ Michael Rinehart, "Where Luther Got It Wrong: The Peasants' Revolt," Way To LEAD, October 23, 2014, <https://waytolead.org/luther-got-wrong-peasants-revolt/>.

⁴ A good summary of Luther's views on Islam is in Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce, "Martin Luther—Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam:," *Word & World* XVI, no. 2 (1996). Part of the difficulty here is that Luther's experience of Islam was formed by the Turkish military incursions into Europe. Still, Luther seemed to have a hard time understanding Muslims as anything other than misguided, bad, or heretical Christians. Luther is sometimes defended for his views on Jews and Muslims with the claim that some of his contemporaries wrote worse things. This might be true but it's a pretty weak defense.

To use document's language, it's not something we ever fully achieve but something we "strive [for] repeatedly."

This unity isn't just a little side project, but it's at the heart of our public witness. Because we know how badly our world needs unity. We need unity with the other people in that river. We can't credibly say that God is reconciling us to one another if our relationships are riddled with animosity and ignorance. And we need unity across generations. Too often we ignore our histories and act like the river began with us. We act like we don't live downstream of anyone else and the river just started when we showed up. Or we opt for cheap solutions to fix our problems and leave our descendants to clean up the mess. Our church, our community, and our world needs unity. We don't need everyone to be the same. But we need a humility about the limits of our own perspective and capabilities, and a willingness to trust in the goodness of others.

That's really what lies at the heart of Reformation Sunday. Reformation Sunday is not a Sunday dedicated to the Lutheran Reformation, a historical event that happened in the past. And to be honest, it really isn't even a Sunday about the church. It's a Sunday about how the Holy Spirit empowers us to seek unity with all of God's people, and bring us together as a river "whose streams make glad the city of God."

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