

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Reformation Sunday • October 27, 2019

Jeremiah 31:31-34 • Psalm 46 • Romans 3:19-28 • John 8:31-36

Two years ago, we commemorated the five hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. One of the products of that commemoration was this book, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*. I have a copy here, and I have a few more if anyone is interested in flipping through it.

This book does two things that I think are really helpful. The first is it has a setting for a joint Lutheran-Catholic prayer service. So if you were here when we had our event with St. Elizabeth's last February, the language that we used for evening prayer was drawn from here. This is good because it meant that we didn't have to negotiate language and volley emails up and down Wyckoff Avenue.

The second nice thing it does is include a list of five ecumenical imperatives. And these are basically five principles that should guide our ecumenical work with the Catholic Church and with other communities of faith.¹ Last year, I talked about number one: "Lutherans and Catholics should always begin from the perspective of unity." This year, we're going to talk about number two. Next year we'll do number three. And we should finally finish all five in 2022. By the time we get to the end, not only can you say that you learned something about ecumenism, but you made it through a sermon series that lasted five years.

So let's go. Ecumenical imperative number two. "Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves be continuously transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith." At the heart of that is "continual transformation" and "mutual witness." When we engage in mission, when we live out our vocations in the world, when we work in partnerships, we always expect to be changed in some way. We always expect that other people have something to offer us or teach us or share with us. We don't simply witness to them. They witness to us.

This is much easier said than done. So often when we engage with people who are different from us, different denominations, different faiths, different backgrounds, we do it not from a posture of curiosity or interest but from a posture of anxiety. Sometimes that anxiety can be a good thing. When we enter someone else's space or engage their community, we're often anxious about whether we'll accidentally offend them or do the wrong thing. Do I have to take my shoes off? Do I have to cover my head? Do I have to genuflect? That's normal. That's healthy.

The problem is when we become anxious that we are going to be changed in some way by this experience. We become afraid that other people are going to have an effect on us. They're going to change us. That might mean changing our stereotypes. That might mean changing our perspective. That might mean changing our sense of who we are. And that change is never easy.

At its heart, this idea of continual transformation and mutual witness is really a question about how power is located in our institutions. Oftentimes, our mental model of the church is that we have been entrusted with the gospel and that other people need to get it from us. So they can

¹ Here are all five: 1) Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced. 2) Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith. 3) 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. 4) Lutherans and Catholics should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time. 5) Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.

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come here Saturdays at five or Sundays at nine-thirty, or we can go to them whenever it's convenient for us. But, you know, they should really come here. And they should become like us.

If that's the way you locate power, if you think the traditions and norms of the church are the center of God's activity, then transformation is a bad thing. Because any transformation is just going to be a decline away from the "real" version that we have received. And if you think the center of God's power is in our expression of church, then mutual witness isn't possible. You can tell other people about what God is doing, but what do they have to tell you?

For as long as there have been Christians in the West, this has been our default setting. A few decades before Luther posted the 95 Theses, 1493 to be exact, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull called "Inter Caetera."² The bull authorized Spain and Portugal to colonize the western hemisphere, cutting a line down the middle with the Spanish to the west and Portuguese to the east. And in the bull Alexander writes, "We make, appoint, and depute you and your said heirs and successors lords of them [the native people] with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind."

In addition to justifying slavery and paving the way for genocide, the bull also advanced a deeply wrongheaded view of Christian mission. That mission involves having power over other people. It involves bringing God to people. The power is centered in the European church and it is brought to the Americas on ships to be enforced top-down on other people who are merely recipients.

There's no room here for continual transformation. The goal is to change natives, not change yourself. And there is no space here for mutual witness. What do these natives have to teach you about anything? You're the one who brought God here.

That's a rather extreme example of this kind of theology, but we still use versions of this today. Ways of locating the center of God's power and activity within our own institutions, traditions, and practices. Sometimes it's just thinking that our traditions are divinely ordained. As if, when Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, he got two sets of tablets and a Lutheran hymnal, too. Sometimes it's making the institution the primary thing. It's revealing when people describe people as "unchurched" as if there's something magical about showing up at a building every few weeks. We never talk about people being "hospital-ed" or "community centered" or "library-ed," but we talk about people being "churched" all the time.³ And other times it's defining ourselves over and against other traditions. When someone asks us what Lutherans believe, who among us hasn't surveyed a vast, five hundred year landscape of rich and varied theological tradition full of people responding to God's grace in innovative and faithful ways and summed it up as "not Catholic."

I've said this before, so you can ignore this if you already know it, but the Lutheran expression of the Christian faith is really about three things. Law and gospel, which means God speaks to us in commands and promises.⁴ Vocation, which means God has empowered us to serve

² A good summary of the "doctrine of discovery" and a full text of the bull are available at "Doctrine of Discovery," Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-now/spotlight-primary-source/doctrine-discovery-1493>.

³ "ELCA Board Affirms Principles for Outreach to Unchurched," *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, March 7, 2002, <https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/4500>.

⁴ "The entire Scripture is divided into these two works. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The second part is the gospel – that is, the promise of grace given in Christ." Philip Melancthon, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XII.

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one another.⁵ And the theology of the cross, which means that God is present with us even in our suffering.⁶ You can build a pretty good Lutheran theology out of those three things.

What do you notice about those three things? They're all about God. They are not about us. They're about how God speaks to us. They're about where God shows up. They're about how God uses us for the sake of our neighbors. Because they're about God's actions, they don't depend on us.

So where is the center of power? It's not in the church. It's with God. Who brings us to faith? God does. Who makes the church one, holy, catholic, and apostolic? God does. Who empowers you to serve other people the way Christ serves you? God does. Our job is not to bring God into the world. Our job is not to bring God to the Gentiles (65) or to the Aztecs (1493) or the west (1810) or to Paterson (2019). Our calling is to catch up to where God is already at work in the world bringing healing and wholeness and redemption.

Hopefully, that realization is liberating for us like it was freeing for the first generation of reformers five centuries ago. When we make God the center, we see that other people don't water down our faith, they enrich it. When we are transformed by encounters with new cultures and traditions and practices, we aren't leaving God behind. We are drawing closer to where God is. And now mutual witness becomes possible. Because I'm no closer to God than anyone else, everyone I meet has something to teach me about what God has done and continues to do in Jesus Christ.

And here's the fun part of this. What allows us to live this way? What allows us to be continually transformed and engage in mutual witness? It's our faith. This is not some "all religions believe the same thing" hippy-dippy stuff. You don't have to be less Lutheran or less Christian or less you to engage in the world. In fact, that faith is what allows you to follow God into the world. An unshakeable faith in God's grace allows us to encounter others as equals. You don't need to leave your beliefs at the door whenever you go somewhere new. What the world needs is not for Lutherans to be less Lutheran. What it needs is more Lutherans who see their faith not as a tradition to be protected but as something that is always emerging and being reformed in every encounter we have.

So go to St. Elisabeth's and ask Fr. Stephen to tell you about prayer. Ask him about the Examen. Catholics have tons to teach us about prayer. Go to Nosh and Drash with Rabbi Beni and learn how to read a text like a rabbi. It's not the way I read texts, but it's way more fun. And you get bagels, too. Or go to Friday prayers at Elzahra in Midland Park. Their hospitality will teach you as much about the table fellowship of the Eucharist as any adult education class I teach. Or, if you're feeling really adventurous, find someone who has been completely turned off by the concept of faith. And just listen to their experience. Will it be comfortable? Nope. But it will help you see things that you often take for granted.

"Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves be continuously transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith." Because when we encounter the other we find that there is no other. There is only us. And only God between us.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁵ "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." Martin Luther, "On the Freedom of a Christian."

⁶ "The man who looks on the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be called a theologian. The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross does, however, deserve to be called a theologian." Martin Luther, Heidelberg Catechism, XIX-XX.