

## Sermon

Grace and Peace, from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Thank you for joining together this weekend as one synod. Over 9,000 members of 140 plus congregations and worshiping communities throughout this region of south central Wisconsin, together. Meeting in our various ministry sites and in Assembly in Middleton to worship, pray, sing, and reflect on God's Word and will for our lives as the Body of Christ in the world today.

You may have noticed that this year we are commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. 500 years ago, in October of 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk in Wittenburg, Germany, set off a chain of events that changed Christianity forever. We Lutherans have been uniquely shaped by that heritage. It continues to inform how we are church, together, in this time and place, for the sake of the world.

But we don't live in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany anymore, and the issues that the church confronted at that time are not the same issues that concern us today.

So Now what? Where are we headed as we begin the next 500 years? What is the church's mission in this day and age? How are we to address the unique challenges and concerns of our 21<sup>st</sup> century global context in ways that are faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

8 or 9 years ago, my father celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination as a Lutheran Pastor. Luther Memorial church in Minneapolis, my parent's home congregation, honored him with a special service and reception. I was asked to preach. I asked Dad to pick the text for the sermon. I asked him to choose a text that had significantly informed his ministry.

He picked this text: 2 Corinthians 5:17-20. I immediately regretted asking him. I'll take a Gospel text over a Paul text any day. I'd much rather have a good Jesus story to preach on than one of Paul's wordy letters. But he selected Paul – so I worked with this text, and it has become a text that more and more informs and shapes my own ministry.

The passage begins with some profound words of reformation:

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

The ELCA has really latched on to these words. You can see it on banners, publications, and on the ELCA website. It's become a kind of slogan for us – *Always Being Made New!*

Now as human beings, we tend not to like new things, at least not right away. What's wrong with the way we've always done it? But it's pretty obvious God is doing a new thing throughout Christ's church. The church doesn't look like it did 500 years ago – even 50 years ago – certainly nothing like 2000 years ago when this new Jesus following movement began.

When I served as parish pastor I thought, "The church is changing," but I didn't realize how quickly that change was occurring until I was elected to this position. Things are shifting.

I hate to bring up the "d" word (decline) but some see it that way. There are fewer people in our church buildings on Sunday mornings. There is less money in the offering plate and less mission support. We have a harder time keeping the buildings up let alone having the resources to reach out. Things have changed. Things are still changing. The church is changing fast!

Now I don't think change necessarily equals decline. The church belongs to Christ and not to us and Christ continues to lead the church where it needs to go. But the church is definitely changing shape from what has been familiar to so many of us. There's anxiety with that. We may feel grief and a sense of loss.

If we trust that Christ is leading the church, however, then we can see change as a good thing, an exciting thing, a hopeful thing. We who follow Jesus, get to participate in this new thing God is doing through Christ's church in our time and place, if we don't get so attached to what we think church should be, the way we think we remember the church being, that we fail to perceive what it is becoming.

*See, everything has become new!*

Let's get back to the 2 Corinthians passage.

All of us know the Great Commission, the last words of Jesus to his disciples recorded in Matthew's Gospel:

Matthew 28:18-20

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

A charge and a promise: Go, to the whole world, make disciples; And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The Church has claimed those words as its mission statement since Jesus first spoke them, and it's been and remains a good mission, a Great Commission. But Paul lifts up another Great Commission - another promise and charge from God, in his second letter to the church in Corinth:

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ.*

God's dream, God's vision, God's intent for the world is reconciliation.

Just before his crucifixion, Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." That's the gospel, folks. All people – all things – are drawn together in Jesus and reconciled to God. And because of Jesus, we have been entrusted with that ministry. We are ambassadors for Christ in the fulfilling of God's intent. Another Great Commission and a particularly urgent call for us as Christ's church today. Recognizing, claiming, embracing, and living out this other Great Commission offers an incredible opportunity and way forward for the church in today's world and context. In Christ, God has reconciled the world to Godself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

Shouldn't the people of Christ's church, reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, be reconciled to one another in the Body of Christ? And couldn't the reconciled Body of Christ be a reconciling force in the world and for the world? And isn't this a primary focus of our shared call to follow Jesus? God has given us the ministry that was Christ's ministry: reconciliation. We are ambassadors for Christ – ambassadors of reconciliation.

God knows – and we know – that our world is moving farther and farther away from reconciliation. In a time when the technology exists to connect us in ways we have never been connected – to connect people all around the world, in real time, to one another – we have never been more divided.

We are so polarized. Political divisions are very obvious these days – red and blue, rural and urban. But more than that we are divided racially, ethnically, economically, socially, denominationally, religiously, you name it. We are divided by fear and mistrust. We are divided, and those divisions will be our destruction. Reconciliation is the only way forward. Without reconciliation, the world will become ever more fragmented and broken and shattered.

Today we are called, as Christ's church, together, for the sake of the world, to attend to that reconciliation ministry with which we have been entrusted. Today, let us commit ourselves to this call to model cooperation, to grow in community, to work together for the healing of God's good creation, to be ambassadors of reconciliation in this world God loves so much, for the sake of the one who on the cross opened his arms and drew the entire world into himself and into the very heart of God.

May the wonder of this new thing God is doing among us carry us ever deeper into lives of faith and service as we move into the next 500 years as participants in this ever reforming church of Christ. Amen.