

SERMON

“LOVE THAT LUTHER”

Today is a very special day for us because today we celebrate the Protestant Reformation and the birth of the Lutheran Church. Today is the 504th anniversary of the Reformation. On this day we celebrate the rediscovery of central truths to our faith ... not truths that were invented by Martin Luther ... but truths that came from Jesus and had kind of been forgotten by God’s people. As we look at some of these truths ... an appreciation arises within me ... and I realize how much I love our Lutheran roots and why our Lutheran heritage is so special.

First of all, I am indebted to Martin Luther for starting the parsonage. He made way for the pastors to have families. From the time of Jesus to Luther ... rules changed in the Church and Christian clergy were not permitted to marry ... which, had it not changed, means I wouldn’t be a pastor today. Martin Luther was a Catholic priest ... but he did get married. In fact, he married a Catholic nun by the name of Katherine von Bora. And Martin and Katie had 6 children.

Luther said he got married for 3 reasons: to spite the Pope, to please his father, and to confirm his teachings. Well, I imagine there was at least one more reason he got married: his beloved Katie helped him in many ways. One of the things she helped him deal with was his depression. He’d have terrible depression, and during one of his depression seizures Katie persuaded Luther to go out for a walk. While he was gone, she put on black mourning clothes. When Luther returned and saw Katie in black, he asked, “Who died?” And she answered, “God must have died!” “What do you mean God died? You know God cannot die,” replied Luther. Katie responded, “Is that so? Well, the way you are so depressed I thought God must have surely died!” His wife had a sense of humor that must have helped.

The second reason I appreciate Luther is because like all of us ... Luther was not perfect. He is another reminder that God can take someone imperfect like us and make amazing things happen. Luther acted and reacted like a typical human being. He definitely had his strengths ... but he also had his weaknesses. Luther was guilty of being anti-Semitic in some of his writings at the end of his

life. Also, near the end of his life, Luther advised a prince in a troubled marriage that bigamy was the answer. But Luther knew full well how human he was ... which is why he referred to his baptism so often. He said he would crawl on his hands and knees to the baptismal font and there be reminded that it was here that God adopted him as His child. I'm thankful that God used Luther in spite of his weaknesses and shortcomings ... because it is a reminder to me that God can use me with all of my own imperfections.

A third reason why I appreciate Luther is because he translated the language of faith into the language of the people. Until Luther, the entire worship service was in Latin. Very few people spoke or read Latin. The Bible was absolutely inaccessible to the people. So, Luther translated the entire Bible into German ... he wrote 36 hymns ... he wrote the two catechisms and volumes of other works.

A fourth reason I appreciate Luther is because of his emphasis on the power of preaching. Luther thought more highly of preaching than he did of reading the Bible or receiving the Sacraments. Luther despised the fact that preaching dealt largely with scholarly intricacies and details. Sermons back then were so out of touch they would often deal with irrelevant questions like: Will our hair and fingernails also be resurrected? Luther felt that preaching should be the top priority in the church. He said, "To preach on a subject irrelevant to a congregation's needs ... is like speaking to a group of old maids on the merits of breastfeeding!" Luther would remind us that proclaiming the Word will change the world.

There are many reasons I am indebted to Martin Luther ... but the biggest reason is what he taught concerning our relationship with God. For years Luther had struggled with how he could be in a right relationship with God. When he was a monk ... he would fast until he fainted. He would strip himself of his clothes and lie on the cold stone floor until he was sick ... he would pray to the saints ... say mass ... but nothing helped. One time he asked a fellow monk ... a man named Staupitz ... to hear his confessions. Luther began ... and one hour later he was still confessing. Two hours later ... he was still confessing. Six hours later Staupitz said he had heard enough.

The Church leadership did nothing to stop this feeling of guilt and hopelessness in people ... in fact they encouraged it. The Church was busy building all those beautiful cathedrals and needed money. So, the Church was involved in a kind of ecclesiastical extortion ... telling people if they gave more money ... they could save themselves and their loved ones from going to Hell.

As Luther studied the Bible ... he learned the truth that God's grace cannot be earned by good works ... and it cannot be bought. Salvation is a gift that can only be accepted in faith. At last, Luther found the peace in his relationship with God that he had been looking for. Our gospel for today proclaims, "The truth will set you free." When you realize that salvation comes by grace through faith ... then you are free. We don't have to try and pretend we're good enough ... or that we've done enough ... or that we are something or somebody we are not.

AMEN.