

Sermon: Reformation Sunday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

October 30, 2016

Year C

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton... are broken people... like me... their sins are like the highest mountain... and their good deeds are like small pebbles... like mine... but they try to make it seem the other way around... as I do...

And what they say... and what they do... reflects a political system wracked with division... but instead of acknowledging any kind of brokenness... both sides assert their own right-ness... a claim to own the truth... and it occurred to me some years ago... that in order to win an election... in order to win over... those in the middle... in order to capture as many "undecided" voters as possible... and maybe even get some to change their minds... it's become paramount to avoid any sense of subtly... any acknowledgment of nuance... and to demonize the other side... in fact... on October 10... radio show host Alex Jones... called Hillary "an abject psychopathic demon from hell"... who smells like sulfur... that her very presence inflicts nightmares on those who get too close to her...

In order to win an election... especially this year it seems... it's become paramount to **not** acknowledge... that the issues we face... the *systemic* evils we face... are so complex... so inter-connected... that solving them... building solutions... is a little bit like a game of Jenga... in reverse... add a little on this side... a little on that side... but not too much... or else everything will tumble... and some people will really be hurt... instead of everyone sharing the same burden... instead of everyone moving towards higher ground together... but that process is messy... and painful... and when sound bytes and attention spans last only moments... it becomes that much more difficult to have the civic discourse that's needed... the prolonged conversations that are needed to forge a path towards resolution... it's something that can almost certainly not happen in one generation...

When the great cathedrals of Europe were built... few people who worked on them expected to see them finished during their lifetimes... some cathedrals took more than a hundred years to complete... being involved in the construction of a cathedral... even if you were the sole or a primary patron... required a willingness to be part of a process that was larger than oneself... to contribute to something that you might never realize... to invest in something... maybe for your children's sake... that you might never receive any return on... and anymore... who wants to do that... we seem to have forgotten how to navigate towards that willingness... we seem to have lost JFK's vision of not asking what our country can do for us... but what we can do for our country... as we all reach higher ground...

On October 31, 2017... we will mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation... when many cathedrals were built... and there will certainly be many worship services... and other events to mark the anniversary... for decades and decades... Reformation Sunday was celebrated... it was felt by many Lutherans... to be a source of pride... in standing up to the Roman Catholic church... but Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton... and many other ELCA leaders have recently cautioned us not to celebrate it... not to use words like festive or rejoice... not to take pleasure in the divisions the Reformation caused... Martin Luther did not want a break-away denomination... he wanted his beloved church to reform from the inside out...

We can however... celebrate the heart of our faith... the Good News that makes us free... when in the waters of baptism we are made One Body... when we ask the Holy Spirit to unite the church in its proclamation and witness to the world... it's because we pray for the day that all Christians will also be One at the Lord's table...

When Joel and I lived in Columbus, OH... in the three years following the election and consecration of gay and partnered... Bp. Gene Robinson... when some priests and congregations in the diocese really struggled with that... it was much easier to ignore each other... or let the bishop deal with it all... or... as politicians do... demonize each

other... but at a deanery meeting — *Lutherans... that's a Conference meeting for Episcopalians* — one of the priests... complained that because he was in the minority... no one listened to him... he didn't feel heard... and because as a gay man... I also knew what it was like to not feel heard... I asked Ron if we might get together to listen to each other... you see... I believe that when we really are listened to... and understood... there's so much validation in that... that even if we don't get our way... even if what we wanted to happen doesn't happen... it can be easier to accept that... and so in June... August... and December 2006... Ron and I... had some conversations... and made some connections across party lines...

In today's Gospel... Jesus says: *If you continue in my word... you are truly my disciples... and you will know the truth... and the truth will make you free...* and I believe... that the kind of freedom that comes from truth... is being freed from the oppressive and emotionally charged divisions which we create and impose on each other...

So we need to ask ourselves... is the diversity of God's creation a mistake... is there only one true denomination... and if you fail to pick the right one... is it really over for you for all eternity... or does diversity serve to glorify God... and if it glorifies God... then we must not confuse diversity with division... and we must remember that God does not celebrate our divisions... when we draw a line between ourselves and another... God leans toward the other side with them...

And while we can be thankful for the lessons... and the insights... and the growth that has come out of the last 499 years... and if the intent of diversity is not to lead to division... then we must also learn to see unity in that diversity... and ask ourselves how we can celebrate the divisions which have come about since 1517... after all... what has reformation ever been about... except continually re-forming us into the body of Christ... we are ever being invited back to unity... back into the oneness about which

John's Gospel spoke: *The Father and I are one... and... On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you...*

At this month's conference... for Lutherans... Anglicans... and Roman Catholics... which I attended... it was the Lutheran's turn to plan the worship and arrange the speaker... and our speaker was Dr. Kathryn Johnson... who is the Director of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations for the ELCA... a position she's held since September 2015... Kathryn graduated from St. Olaf College... and earned a Master's degree at Cambridge... and a Doctorate in Religious Studies from Yale... and from 2007 to 2012 she served as Assistant General Secretary for Ecumenical Affairs at the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, Switzerland.

And some of you may know... that at Churchwide Assembly in New Orleans this past summer... *Episcopalians... that's General Convention for Lutherans...* ELCA voting members — by a vote of 931 to nine — overwhelmingly accepted the Declaration on the Way... a unique ecumenical document which includes a litany of 32 statements of agreement... where Catholics and Lutherans have said that there are not dividing differences between them... and which marks a path toward greater unity...

And considering the centuries-long animosity between Lutherans and Catholics, this was a momentous and historic agreement... and even about those items for which there is not yet agreement... there are some suggested ways forward...

Kathryn led our discussions from the Declaration's accompanying study guide... titled... From Conflict to Communion... and she spoke about an event that's going to be held tomorrow... when the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church will hold a joint ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation... in Lund, Sweden. Pope Francis, the Lutheran World Federation President... and its General Secretary... will lead the Ecumenical Commemoration in cooperation with the Church of Sweden and the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm... tomorrow's commemoration will lift up the

ecumenical developments between Catholics and Lutherans... and the joint gifts received through dialogue... and will include a common worship based on a recently published Catholic-Lutheran "Common Prayer" liturgical guide...

The General Secretary said: "I'm carried by the profound conviction... that by working towards reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics... we are working towards justice... peace... and reconciliation in a world torn apart by conflict and violence." And although Kathryn focused primarily on Lutherans and Roman Catholics... there was similar progress for Episcopalians and Roman Catholics... even during the LARC Conference itself... when Archbishop Justin Welby and Pope Francis issued a Common Declaration which said, in part: "We are impatient for progress... that we might be fully united in proclaiming... in word and deed... the saving and healing gospel of Christ to all people. For this reason we take great encouragement from our meetings with so many Catholics and Anglicans who... on the basis of all that they have in common... are eager to go forward together in collaborative mission and witness to the "ends of the earth."

There will almost certainly never be complete agreement between the major political parties... though there seems to be a growing desire *among the people* for a political reformation... for an end to divisiveness... and likewise... there will never be complete agreement between different Christian denominations... on all issues of Christology... belief... practice... and *church* politics... but we are learning the world over... that we must engage in dialogue... and ask ourselves whether our political party or denomination brings us together as One... or foments division... whether the focus is on what unites us and not on what divides us... helps us learn that there can be both diversity and unity in our hearts and minds... and in our civil discourse... as we work together to bring God's Kingdom into an increasingly substantive reality... Holy God... make it so...

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