

## REFORMATION UNENDING

Jer. 31:31-34; Rom. 3:19-28; John 6:31-36

“Martin, ...your plea to be heard from Scripture is the one always made by heretics.... Martin, how can you be so sure that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than then all? You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith, instituted by Christ the perfect lawgiver,... confirmed by the sacred Councils defined by the Church in which all our fathers believed until death, and gave to us as an inheritance, and which now we are forbidden by the pope and the emperor to discuss, lest there be no end to debate. I ask you, Martin, candidly,... do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?’ Luther replied... ‘Unless I am convicted by Scripture *and plain reason*—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.’ The earliest version added these words: ‘Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.’” Martin Luther, 1521.

When I was a younger man, I would preach sermons that would qualify the greatness of Martin Luther by citing his writings against the Jews, his betrayal of the peasants when they rose up against the German nobility, inspired by Luther’s challenge to the Roman Catholic Church, or his too-easy accommodation to the authority of the German nobles who protected him. My disposition is such that I cannot be a cheerleader and especially not for Luther, who never wanted cheerleaders or Lutherans, for that

matter. But as I have grown older, I am increasingly in awe of Luther, this Colossus who straddled the Medieval and modern worlds, so humanly , so bravely, so brilliantly, so faithfully, surely one of the greatest figures in Western and, I would say, in all of human history, this man who believed and taught that above all else the Christian must be Christ to her or his neighbors.

The lessons that we read on Reformation Day in the church are certainly appropriate. . Jeremiah writes, “The days are surely coming, says God, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” Read on this day, this text is understood as a description of the Reformation that Luther provoked, a new covenant with the Church, not like the covenant of the past, not a law promulgated and imposed by popes and hierarchies of clergy, but rather a law that touches and lives within the human heart. More than law, really, according to St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans, the grace of God offered to us freely beyond anything we do, any sin we commit for our salvation. We are justified by grace through faith. To know this, according to St. John is to know the truth that will set us free. Knowledge of the truth is the goal, and for Luther the truth to be known is the love of God revealed in Christ. This is the truth that, once known, will set us free.

The church which arose in Luther’s name was and is a confessional church, a church that understands itself in terms of the historic creeds (confessions) of the church and which went on to authorize confessions to define it in reference to the other brands of Christianity, The Roman Catholics on the right and the Puritans and other Protestants on the left. Such confessions are perfectly understandable as means for the church to identify itself and distinguish itself from other religious views and philosophies.

Generally, such confessions are the result of hard-won struggles of people to understand who they are and what they believe. They emerge out of specific historical circumstances and have a specific cultural context. Luther was himself committed to the confessions of the Church, but as his words to the church council at Worms that I read to you a few minutes ago indicate, the truth was for him the highest authority and that to which he was committed as to God who is the Truth to which all our truths are by images which we dimly see. Luther says, against the church of his day, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.” He believed he had seen a truth that the church of his day refused to see, and he refuses to be diverted from this truth by accommodating himself to the church’s rules and practices.

The church must be at least confessional enough to know what it believes. But all of its beliefs must be open to question, as Jesus questioned the Judaism of his experience and Luther questioned the church of his experience. One appeals to a higher truth in asking such questions. Luther looked for this higher truth in Scripture and plain reason. Likewise, we at Emanuel have consulted scripture and plain reason to understand what is the best language by which to refer to God, concluding that if God is God, then God is not a male and should not be referred to in male terms. Or on another front, we have concluded there is not reason to withhold communion from a person because of age, and we have encouraged all to receive this symbol of God’s grace in which we believe the Spirit of God is present. And we have become a Reconciling congregation because we cannot bear the exclusion from full participation of sisters and brothers in Christ for reason of their sexual orientation. In these instances and others as well, Emanuel has gone ahead of the practice and policy of the ELCA and taken positions to which the

ELCA would or will eventually arrive in the belief that the truth of scripture and reason demanded as much from us. In so doing, we followed the example of Luther, who believed Christians have a higher obedience than obedience to the institution of the church.

I received an email last Sunday that I knew was coming. It was from Lucas Novak, who, as you know, is a member of this congregation and a candidate for ordination in the ELCA. In this email, Lucas expresses his gratitude to Emanuel for his upbringing in the faith and for the congregation's support of his candidacy for ministry. Then he goes on to say, "These past few years of pursuing ordination in the ELCA have been fraught with more obstacles than conduits to leadership in the Church.... At this stage in my life and learning, the prospects of going forward in pursuing ordination in the ELCA seem more and more restrictive. In particular, as I consider my sense of call to hospital chaplaincy and ministries beyond preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments, ordination seems farther from me now than it did when I first began Seminary. This is the result of the ELCA's candidacy process, not the ELCA itself or Lutheran theology." The upshot of this is that Lucas will be changing denominations, moving from the ELCA to the United Church of Christ. I understand his decision. It has been a difficult one. In many respects, it is a very Lutheran thing to do.

The hymnal we use on most Sundays, *The New Century Hymnal*, is the hymnal of the United Church of Christ. It is a splendid resource, full of thoughtful renderings of familiar hymns along with a good sampling of some hymns that are not so familiar. In the "Forward" to this hymnal, a church official writes of the hymnal, "It is, at best, the contribution of the united Church of Christ to the larger quest of the universal church to

praise God faithfully in each generation. It is, however, a hymnal boldly committed to a spirit of inclusiveness.” Which, of course, is why we use it at Emanuel, a decision we made in the spirit of the Lutheran Reformation of the church, finding in it a resource that would help to set our worship free from some of the restrictions in other hymnals including the hymnal of our own church which narrow the scope of our worship and our understanding of God. It should be said that the Lutheran Church has gifts and resources of many sorts from which the United Church of Christ and other churches have benefited and will benefit in the future—one thinks, for example of the ministries of the Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran Social Ministries. The sharing of gifts and resources is one of the ways the Reformation tradition continues, denominations and churches informing one another in an effort to reflect ever more faithfully the truth of Christ that will set us free. Amen.

Reformation Day, October 31, 2010

Emanuel Lutheran Church