

“MARTIN LUTHER’S ‘EUREKA!’ MOMENT”

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 2, 2017

Text: John 11:1-45

I hope you don't mind that I have allowed the 500th anniversary of the Reformation to intrude on the season of Lent this year. I have deliberately not called it a “celebration” of the Reformation but a “commemoration” of that event or sequence of events. The reason is that as a “Lutheran” church we have a complicated relationship with the man who nailed (or maybe didn't nail) 95 theses to the castle church door in Wittenberg.

For one thing, to celebrate our distinctiveness as Lutherans would seem to work against our unity with other Christians. For another, we are also on some level ashamed of Martin Luther. At the upcoming Indiana-Kentucky Synod Assembly, two of our guest speakers will be Jewish rabbis. I have a feeling, without even being told, that part of the agenda will be for us to recall and discuss some of the heinous things our Doctor Martin said about Jews, for which there can be no excuse. Some of those things he said were even used by the Nazis to support the holocaust of Jews.

I have no interest in getting Martin Luther off the hook for his antisemitism, even by attributing it to his later years, when he was sick. That is no excuse. He was just wrong about that, as he was wrong other times in ways that hurt many people.

The best way to make something of this 500th anniversary is probably to appreciate Martin Luther's “Eureka” moment.

You remember the early Greek scholar who made a discovery in his bathtub. He discovered how to measure the volume of an irregular object. The object's volume would be equal to the easily measurable volume of water displaced when you put the irregular object into the water. Reportedly,

Archimedes was so thrilled with this discovery that he did not think to put his clothes on before running through the city yelling “Eureka, eureka!” Which is Greek for “I have discovered it,” but is now an English word since someone discovered gold in California.

Ironically, Luther's “Eureka!” moment is not something we can brag about as Lutherans. Luther himself could not brag about it. In the end, he expressed the essence of that “Eureka!” moment by jotting on a paper by his deathbed, “We are beggars; this is the truth about us.”

That was his “Eureka!” which is expressed in everything he wrote from that point forward. In the Small Catechism, just for one example, in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, he wrote “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.” That's half of the “Eureka!” the other half follows it: “But instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.”

Notice the displacement here? The equation? It is practically a corollary to the discovery of Archimedes. Luther saw that in Jesus Christ the grace of God totally displaces anything we might offer by way of self-justification. Whereas theology in Luther's time made our salvation a joint effort between us and God, Luther took all our feeble, selective, disappointingly hypocritical efforts entirely out of the picture—and when he did, he observed how the good news from Jesus came rushing in to

entirely fill us with holiness and peace, “without any merit or worthiness on our part.” What a discovery! Describing that “Eureka!” moment later he said, “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through the open gates.”

This is actually all we have from Martin Luther that matters. And it is not from Martin Luther. He merely pointed to the glory of what Jesus had done fifteen hundred years before him. Jesus found people from whom every last vestige of holiness and righteousness had been sucked out--and he gave them full and complete fellowship with God—without any merit or worthiness on their part. Jesus did not seek out people who needed a touchup. He sought the one sheep out of one hundred who was totally lost, and brought that one home. And, he claimed, there was more rejoicing in heaven over that than over the ninety-nine sheep who “needed no repentance.”

In short, what we appreciate about Luther is something which is 100% God’s work; and it is expressed in a theology in which everything that matters is the work of God. So, how can we possibly celebrate ourselves, our lineage, our forefathers, our denominational heritage? To do so is to fail to understand the “Eureka!” of the old German Doctor Luther.

Why bring this up today?

Because on this Sunday before Passion Sunday, a week before we listen to the story of Jesus being totally emptied and crucified, we see a drama in which Jesus shows what he means by “empty.” He allows Lazarus, who represents us, not just to get critically ill, but to die—so that the works of God might be shown in him by Jesus raising him from the dead.

Jesus tells us with this sign that he is not being merely metaphorical when he says that he gives life to the dead.

Looking at the other signs in John, we might attribute some degree of cooperation to the persons who “paid good attention,” “thought about it,” “did their part,” “repented,” or something like that. But here comes Jesus, in his most characteristic, most critical sign/demonstration, and he “gives life to the dead” by calling his dead friend Lazarus from the dead. “Lazarus, come out of there!”

If we measure by this sign, we will see what Luther saw when he reconsidered the theology of his day and held it up to Scripture. God has always been the total savior, whether it has been saving Israel from Egypt or you and me from sin. “He has raised us together.” “He has given us life together.” “He has made us sit together in the heavenly places.” Always, God entirely displaces our religious or ethical or theological initiatives and simply calls us forth. Out from the tombs which are the dead ends of our own investigations or paltry efforts. Out from despair. Out from apathy. Out from the effects of our misdeeds. He simply calls us out, and with his power we arise like dead people, to have our bandages taken off so we can go get something to eat and begin to serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Always, it is God. Totally.

That’s what Luther found. That is what made him cry “Eureka!”. But when he discovered this displacement theorem, that it is all God’s work, received through faith, then he felt as though heaven itself appeared on earth. He heard angels singing, he knew a bounce in his step, he saw all people as God’s children, and so on and so forth.

But don’t just listen to Luther. He is not our authority, he merely opened a window.

Listen instead to the liturgy of the church, listen to yourselves, saying and singing that we realize our only strength is our God, and that only through the mercy of our God do we have peace.

Eureka!