

“TICKLED TO BE LUTHERAN”

A Sermon for Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2017

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

“If David thus calls [the Messiah] Lord, how can he be his son?” No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”

If you have a taste for snarkiness or irony, you gotta love Jesus. If you root for underdogs. If you love surprises. If you hate being pushed around, you gotta love Jesus.

Last week we read about some people laying a trap for Jesus with a question about paying taxes to the emperor; he slipped out of their clutches with a sharp answer about God and Caesar.

This week Jesus goes on offense. He puts a question to them in order to shut them up. “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” To which they give the stock answer, “He is the son of David.” Most people would have agreed. The crowd would have nodded their heads. Then Jesus says to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls the Messiah ‘Lord,’” and he cited Psalm 110:

The LORD says to my lord (i.e., to the Messiah), “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.”

[then you need to read the rest of the psalm, which would have come to mind for the people Jesus was talking to . . .]

The LORD sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes.

Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains.

From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you.

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.

He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses;

he will shatter heads over the wide earth.

He will drink from the stream by the path; therefore, he will lift up his head.

Boom! Guess he told them! If there was any chance at all this man was the Messiah, it would be a bad idea to make an enemy of him!

It reminds me of how my brothers and I used a couple stock warnings or threats with each other. (It was preferable to fighting.) “Jump back!” or “I’ll knock the fire out of you.”

Jesus had set his course. He knew what he was doing. He was not going to be prevented. So he said to those who would push him off course: “Jump back, or I’ll knock the fire out of you.”

Which is hilarious! Because we know the end of the story! He did become the Messiah, but not to “fill the nations with corpses,” as the psalm says. Although it was true of him as a leader, that young people came to him “like dew from the womb of the morning.” They rose up to follow him. And he did become a priest after the order of Melchizedek, that is, an outside-the-box priest. He came to give life!

Therefore, when opposition arose he slipped away.

I love Jesus. I love the gospel.

I love that the 500th anniversary of the Reformation coincides roughly with my last year of ministry. It somehow makes the sixteenth-century shake-up more personal to me.

It's been personal for a long time. Because I love the gospel.

Ever since I learned in seminary the basics about telling the gospel from the other parts of scripture, I have found it to be amusing and challenging and delightful and relevant and healing and beautiful . . . and slippery. As a pastor, I love how the gospel gives me freedom to minister. I don't have to know everything. I don't have to get everything right. I am not slave to a rulebook. It's not my burden to make people behave or teach them gobs of facts. I don't have to measure how closely people obey the two great commandments. I am here to proclaim the gospel, a gospel I have enjoyed for many years now. But it is still fun to reflect on, and even more fun to live by.

Intellectually, I find its elusiveness attractive. That is a theme Luther found in Isaiah ("My thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord"); in Jesus ("I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants); and in Paul ("Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"). The gospel cannot be fitted in to any intellectual superstructure. When we try to capture it and make it fit our patterns of thinking, it slips away like Jesus with the Pharisees.

It slips away and goes where it can give peace and freedom. Not necessarily where we expect it, but wherever the Spirit of God is working. It doesn't belong to any denomination; it belongs to all denominations. But it is not under the control of anyone. It slips away even from attempts to classify it.

The gospel is simple, yet it connects to our complicated lives at every single point. Listening to

the radio, to commercial pitches and news and love songs, every voice or idea I hear connects to the gospel—usually at right angles. Every boast, every complaint, every denunciation, every woe, every comparison, every beautiful idea, every judgment; everything in this world gets relativized by and subordinated to a message from God which overrides and undermines all that . . . and gives us peace in spite of it.

For example, someone on the radio tells me "time is money," and I think: but the gospel is about eternal value available in unmeasured quantity to all of us. Someone sings "This is an eternal love," and I know better; I know that human love fails and breaks and we let each other down but God's love does not. They warn me "space is limited, so hurry" and I think about how vast is the kingdom of God, in which there is room for all. They tell me the Colts are worse than ever, and I think of how God loves even the guy who dropped a couple passes--and perhaps especially that person, because the hammer is coming down on him in the Monday paper.

The world loves to evaluate, judge, discriminate, correct, teach, harangue, control, condemn [sic, the verb from which the word "contempt" comes], improve, attack, criticize, divide—especially divide; the gospel loves to love. The law barks at me; the gospel makes me sing.

And when the church adopts the world's way? When the church becomes one more regulatory body using the name of God to tell us what to do and how badly it will end for the wicked and so on; when the church puts on the robes of law and purports then to represent God; when the church itself hurts people--then the gospel slips out and applies oil to our wounds and puts us on a donkey and takes us down to the inn at Jericho and asks the innkeeper to please take care of us.

I love the gospel. Partly just because it is so simple and so different and elusive, but of course mainly because it saves what the law of God can at best

improve. And partly how it saves is by being outside the box.

Power and wisdom are the two vehicles the world always uses to save itself. Power and wisdom; the pen and the sword. Two boxes, outside of which stands a unique, unparalleled gospel. Smart people and strong people think they can save the world. But in the end, what saves is neither the power nor the wisdom of people, but the foolishness and weakness of God—which is made available to us in the son of God, the Messiah, who slipped away from wise and powerful people in order to die for us on a cross and give himself to us, so that whenever we feel weak or foolish (which for me is fairly often) we know that we shall rise as he once rose from the dead to live and rule eternally.

So I praise God for enabling Martin Luther to recall the church's attention to the gospel five hundred years ago, when it was mostly overlooked or contradicted. I praise God for the gospel itself—for not just forming me and leaving me to my own devices, but even more for re+forming me by his Son and transforming me [see the banner], yes, even me, by his Holy Spirit, and giving me peace.

I “second” the words the choir sang for us just now: “Recall now, o Lord, your office, that you are a prince of peace.” And “Let us from now on speak your divine Word in peace.”

Amen.

Notes:

1. During the month of October 2017 I preached five Sundays on the topic of “It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure,” (Philippians 2:13)
2. On Reformation Sunday, rather than use the readings assigned for that day, I used the lessons for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost. Instead of choosing obviously “Lutheran” texts, I continued my task of demonstrating, using the Matthew gospels, the difference it makes to employ Lutheran hermeneutical & homiletical principles.
3. Our worship area was graced with banners designed by our own Linda Henke for this special anniversary, seen here. (To see more of her work, to lindahenke.com.)
4. Led by our precentor, Peter Rogahn, the choir sang a Reformation cantata by Gottfried August Homilius (a pupil of J. S. Bach): “Preise, Jerusalem, den Herrn.”

