

Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/25/2009, Reformation Sunday
John 8:31-36
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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

“If you continue in my word...” - John 8:31

1. Thank you, Pastor Fryer, for this gracious invitation to preach the homily here at Immanuel Lutheran on Reformation Sunday. Pastor Greg and I met last June at an ecumenical conference in Washington, D.C. at which his spouse, Pastor Carol, was the chaplain. We hit it off and our conversation carried over to a series of emails and a delightful dinner at the Fryer home one Friday evening last summer with a mutual Catholic priest friend from Brooklyn. Ecumenism is as much about friendships as it is about the elimination of roadblocks on the path to unity.
2. As the chief ecumenical officer for the Catholic bishops of the United States, I am devoted to removing roadblocks by means of theological dialogues and other kinds of meetings involving scholars and church leaders. This responsibility can sometimes be a cause of heartache, particularly when the dialogue breaks down over some or another misunderstanding. As an ecumenical officer, I am also blessed with having many friendships with dedicated colleagues in the ecumenical movement. This aspect of my work always gives me joy. Sometimes in this work we lean on friendships when relations between our churches are stressed over actions taken by high ranking officials or legislative bodies, especially when they concern polarizing issues having to do with race, gender or sexuality.
3. I feel particularly blessed by my association with the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the USA, which has counted among its participants some of the best Lutheran and Catholic scholars of our generation. Owing in part to a high degree of mutual respect and collaboration between dialogue members, like the late cardinal-theologian Avery Dulles and the late biblical scholar John Reumann, this dialogue has produced a series of agreements that have narrowed the gap between Catholics and Lutherans on what pertains to salvation in Christ. Along with the contributions of German scholars, the U.S. dialogue has played a significant role in the discussions that led, ten years ago this Saturday, to the signing of the historic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Together in Augsburg Germany, the birthplace of the Reformation, Bishop Christian Krause of the Lutheran World Federation and Cardinal Edward Cassidy on behalf of the Catholic Church signed an agreement that removed the first point of division in the conflicts of the 16th century. From then on, Catholics and Lutherans could profess together: “By

grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works." As the two leaders signed the historic agreement, and others afterwards affixed their names to it, the assembly in the Sankt Anna Kirche sang *Veni Creator Spiritus*, calling down the Holy Spirit's gift of unity and peace on the entire church.

4. A colleague of mine at the bishops' conference teaches a theology course next door at the Dominican House of Studies. He recently told me a funny anecdote about a young Jesuit seminarian who approached a young Dominican friar about the rich legacies of their two religious orders. (The Jesuits and the Dominicans, I should add, have been rivals throughout most of their shared history—kind of like the New York Mets and the New York Yankees.) "You know," said the young Jesuit, "our orders are really very similar, and so we ought not to think of ourselves being in competition with one another." "Really?" said the Dominican. "What do you mean?" "For example," said the Jesuit. "They were both founded by Spaniards, Saint Ignatius of Loyola and Saint Dominic of Osma. "True," said the Dominican, "but they're also *really* different. Mine was founded to fight the heresy of the Albigensians, and yours to stem the tide of the Lutherans and other Reformers." "Well, why does that make our orders so different?" asked the puzzled Jesuit. The Dominican replied: "Met any Albigensians lately?"
5. Today we Catholics are grateful to be meeting Lutherans of varied denominational affiliations in academic and congregational settings. Our parishes are home to many inter-church marriages in which Lutheran-Catholic couples give powerful witness to the unity in Christ that we seek for the whole church. Our Catholic schools and colleges have been educating Lutheran youth for more than a generation, with respect and appreciation for their confessional loyalties. Our hospitals and nursing homes care for members of your church, just as your institutions serve the health needs of our members—comforting them in their trials, honoring their dignity. These are all the blessed fruits of the ecumenical movement, and for them we should give special thanks on Reformation Sunday.
6. In so many of these encounters, we meet you as brothers and sisters faithful to the word of God and willing to hold us, as Catholics, accountable to the authoritative witness of Holy Scripture. On account of our national dialogue we Catholics have been led to reexamine some of our theological expressions, such as those having to do with the Mother of God. What wonderful light was cast on Mary when Lutheran and Catholic scholars back in the 1970s together looked at passages in the New Testament and proposed a new way of speaking about Jesus' mother as the "first disciple." Our current round, focusing on our hope for eternal life, has led the Catholic members to reexamine penitential exercises like indulgences in light of what the Bible teaches about prayer and conversion. Through dialogue and shared study of the word, Catholics are better able to renew their own devotional practices and grasp more deeply the

truths about grace as God's always prior gift that accompanies us at every step of the journey toward his kingdom.

7. The word that confronts us, as Lutherans and Catholics walking together, is the mirror that Christ on the cross holds up to every fallen human being. "Let the one who is without sin, cast the first stone." Our lesson is located within chapter 8 of St. John's Gospel, which is framed by the threat of casting stones. It begins with the story of the woman who is caught in adultery and about to be stoned by her accusers. Jesus shows her mercy and speaks to her a word of encouragement: "From now on, avoid this sin." John 8 ends with the Pharisees enraged at Jesus for both claiming to be God and charging his adversaries with culpable blindness. "Before Abraham was, I AM." Christ is truth, and the truth convicts us of our sin.
8. How presumptuous have we been as a divided Christian people through centuries of religious wars and inter-confessional rivalry for having forgotten the sin of our disunity. We threw stones at one another, and Europe bled—seven million in the Thirty Years' War of the 17th century. We leveled anathemas at each other, and Europe responded in large measure by leaving Christian faith behind and becoming home to secularism and ideologies of hate that led to the catastrophes of the 20th century. The word confronts us as judgment upon our blindness, our forgetfulness—the very word that our forbears sought to defend, often nobly and courageously, but often with misplaced passion. No one is without sin, and true reform in the church begins with the acknowledgment that "I" am a great sinner and that God is a great savior.
9. The word of Christ confronts us with our own sinfulness and covers us with his own righteousness so that we can be fit to live for him and live *in him*. The word for "continue" in our lesson is the same word that Jesus uses when speaking in John 15 about the vine and the branches (*meno*). We are made righteous by the truth revealed in Christ so that we can live in Christ, just as a branch lives in a tree. Christ is our justification, so that he can become our home—but not in the sense of the Roman home of the ancient world, the *Paterfamilias*, in which slaves lived alongside sons. In Christ's home there are no slaves, but only sons and daughters who are loved into forgiveness and loved into loving and serving others.
10. Can we live in this house of freedom together? Can we live in Christ together, sharing *all* the spiritual treasures we possess because of his grace? This has been the great question of the ecumenical movement. The very word "ecumenical" comes from the Greek *oikos* for household. From the same root comes the word "economy," which suggests a sharing of goods by members of the same community. Within our household, Christians live in separate rooms and often do not share with one other their spiritual treasures. This is a tragedy. Within our household, we Catholics feel that we cannot yet share with Lutherans, outside of exceptional circumstances, the Eucharist we call the "source and summit" of our lives. This is a tragedy. Doors must still be

opened, new conversations initiated so that one day the whole family can come to the eucharistic table and recognize in each other the same faith in Christ's saving death—the same hope in eternal life—the same love that expresses itself in compassionate service to the poor, and in respect for God's law as revealed in his other great work, the book of nature.

11. How far we have come in Lutheran-Catholic reconciliation, and yet how far we must still travel. At just the moment when we are marking ten years of agreement on the doctrine of justification, our relationship is burdened by developments that show up profound differences within and between our churches on matters of human sexuality. I was present for the votes in Minneapolis last August when the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted to accept the social statement *Gift and Trust*, and also a set of policies permitting the rostering of clergy in partnered same gender relationships. I listened with deep respect to the persons who gave testimony, often deeply emotional, on both sides of the assembly debate. When the votes were announced by the Presiding Bishop, I prayed alongside a fellow observer from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. He and I then shared with one another our fears about the future of Lutheran-Catholic relations, and what this dramatic change in policy might signify for global Lutheran fellowship and for the broader movement of Christian unity.
12. It was not until the first of this month that my anxieties over these developments began to subside. ELCA, Methodist, and Catholic representatives gathered that evening in Old St. Patrick's Church in downtown Chicago to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration. From the pulpit, the chairman of the Catholic bishops' ecumenical committee spoke directly to the issue of change in ELCA policy and teaching—the “elephant in the room”, as it were. Rather than excoriate or despair about what had taken place in Minneapolis, Archbishop Wilton Gregory told the gathering that dialogue between us is not an option. Christ demands it! Christ continues to beckon us to walk together and speak truth to one another in love, so that his word can set the members of his body free for service on behalf of the world. “Future rounds of our bilateral conversations must undertake,” the archbishop said, “a careful study of the foundations of moral discernment in our respective traditions. The expertise of biblical scholars and specialists in [moral theology] are especially needed for this shared task. The crisis between us on the noble purposes of human sexuality, which is also a crisis within many of the churches, can be understood in the Chinese sense of ‘opportunity’—that is, as an opportunity for deeper and more energetic engagement in the work of reconciliation.” We do not walk away from one another, even if we perceive the other to be straying from the liberating truths of the gospel. We hold one another accountable to the word of God, and we speak the truth in love, while showing deep respect for the other in his or her struggles.

13. It is sometimes easier to walk away. Factions that have signed peace agreements sometimes slide back into a posture of mutual hostility. Political wrangling in Northern Ireland reminds us of the fragility of all peace accords. The Middle East remains a cauldron of interreligious animosity, despite years of dialogue aimed at achieving a final settlement. But that cannot be the case for Christians who for the last one hundred years have heard the prayer of Christ in a new way: “Father, may they be one, as we are one so that the world might believe.” (John 17:21)
14. My friends, we cannot separate the two words “truth” and “love” when applied to our search for unity through obedience to God’s word. As Cardinal Walter Kasper, Vatican head of ecumenism and world class theologian, said at an Anglican-Catholic meeting in Lourdes last year: “In all of this we should not forget: unity can be brought about by love and by truth. Both are intimately linked. Truth without love can be harsh and repelling; but love without truth becomes dishonest; so we should tell the truth in love, i.e., not with arrogance but with respect, sensitivity and patience.” Only by speaking the truth in love can we make God’s word audible, the word that can bring healing to the body of Christ.
15. I am deeply grateful for this invitation to worship with you on Reformation Sunday. I hope it is the beginning of a friendship that allows each of us, and our communities, to continue in his word. In friendship we can help one another be at home in his word, so that we may know the truth—his truth, which sets us free!