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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/28/2012, Reformation Sunday
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36
Hans Luther and his son Martin

²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. (Romans 3:28, NRSV)

Hans Luther was the father of Martin Luther, the great Reformer and teacher at the start of our Lutheran tradition. If Hans Luther was like most fathers, he wanted things to be even better for his son than they were for himself. And in many ways, this turned out to be true for the old man. Hans Luther, for example, seems never to have gone to school and could not read or write. But he proudly supported his brilliant son Martin in his education, all the way through a Master's Degree. Then young Martin went on to earn his doctorate and became a world-renowned theologian. Many people even to this day refer to the son as "blessed Martin Luther" and we bow our heads with gratitude that God granted Luther to the Church. No one remembers the father, Hans, and I suspect that is fine with the old man. Up in heaven above, I bet he is proud to say that he is the father of the famous Martin Luther and glad to share beatitude with his son.

I read Luther all the time. I hope to do so with increasing earnestness over the next nine years and then write a book on Luther in my retirement. A few months back I ran across a passage in Luther's Galatians commentary that I filed away in my memory for this particular Sunday, Reformation Sunday. I think of it as a moving example of what the Lutheran Reformation was all about.

CONSOLING THE CONSCIENCE

And that great subject is "the consolation of the troubled conscience." As it is with an individual soul, so it is with the seasons and ages of the Church: what needs to be said varies according to the hopes and needs, fears and temptations of the age. What a young person burning with sexual desire needs to hear might not be the same as what an old person preoccupied with weighty matters and physically exhausted needs to hear. The holy Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is *one* message, the same yesterday, today, and forever. But the *emphases* of that holy message might need to change according to the spirit of the age.

In Luther's day and age, the church was in profound need of consolation. Somehow, faith and piety had reached such a state that the good news of the resurrection of Jesus hardly functioned as gospel at all. People could hear that Jesus was risen, and fail to be comforted by that message that caused the angels above to laugh and weep with joy. Indeed, faith and piety had reached such a state that the good news of the resurrection of Jesus was almost entirely obscured by the focus on human merit. The age had become preoccupied not with the cheerful

message that we are all in the hands of that good man, Jesus, but rather with the grim question of whether we had made ourselves worthy to stand before a righteous God.

Luther was an immense mind, a brilliant theologian, and a prolific writer. All of these things are true. But chief of all about Luther was that he was a pastor. He had a pastoral heart. And he truly grieved at a world being deprived of the hope and joy of the Gospel.

So, let's take a look at the Galatians passage I want to live up. It is an illustration of comforting the troubled conscience. It is about the condemned prisoner. Think of those prisoners being beheaded or tortured in television shows like *The Tudors* or *Borgia*. Such executions were not fairy tales, but awful reality. There seems to be no end to our human ability to be cruel. Of course it is easy to think that the one who orders the beheading or hanging or sawing in half of a human being is cruel. But Luther believed that faith and piety had so lost its way that even the monk or the priest quietly speaking final words to the condemned prisoner was also being cruel. They did not want to be. Certainly not! But their final pastoral counsel to the condemned prisoner sometimes failed to lift up Jesus and his goodness, but rather bypassed Jesus in order to focus on whether the poor prisoner could somehow manage to die a God-pleasing death. Listen to Luther describe this:

... exercises of devotion and afflictions of the body are not to be dragged into the question of justification. This is what the monks did. When they were supposed to comfort someone about to be executed for his crimes, they said: "You must suffer this ignominious death willingly. And if you do, you will merit the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life." What a horrible thing this is, that a wretched thief, murderer, or robber in his supreme anguish is seduced this way! In the very moment of death, when he is about to be hanged or beheaded, he is robbed of the Gospel about Christ, who is the only One able to bring him comfort and salvation then; and he is told to hope for pardon and the forgiveness of sins if he willingly endures that ignominious death which is being inflicted on him for his crimes. This is adding extreme perdition to someone who is already most afflicted, and showing him the way to hell through a false notion about and confidence in his own death. (Luther, Galatians 2:15-21)

The pastor faces a choice. Only a little a time remains for the prisoner. The pastor could urge the prisoner to fight through his terror and sadness and to mount up a certain set to his soul. The prisoner could try to achieve an attitude of acceptance of the just sentence about to be executed upon him. The prisoner could try to achieve heartfelt sorrow for his crime. The pastor could seek repentance in

the sinner and hope that the sinner could maintain that state of repentance all the way through the downward swing of the ax. That would be to focus on the question of human merit.

Or the pastor could say to the condemned prisoner something like this: The time draws near. Soon you will die. But I want you to know this: In dying, you are falling into the hands of your Savior Jesus Christ. He too died a violent death. He died that others might live. But think of this, and in thinking of it, be encouraged: Jesus did not die just for the saints, but also for the sinners. He died not only for St. Peter, but also for the wretched thief on the cross dying at his right hand. If you had more time, it would be good and true and worth everything to live for him and to dedicate yourself to a life of repentance. But it is too late for that now. Your *time* has run out. But your *life* has not, for you are off now to see Jesus. You will bow your knee before him, and he will make of you what he will. But take heart. You are soon to see Jesus and he is a good man.

Do you see the difference between these two approaches? Maybe it is a subtle difference, but it is what the Lutheran Reformation was about. Both pastors seek holiness of life. Both pastors want the sinner to turn from sin and live. Both pastors believe that sin carries consequences beyond these threescore and seven years. Indeed, sin carries consequences into eternity. But the one pastor focuses on the state of the sinner's soul, while the other focuses on Jesus as the hope of this world, even hope for the sinner.

We are Lutherans and should be proud to be so! For we believe in the consolation of the troubled conscience and a version of the Gospel that gives hope to a sad world.

So, treasure sayings such as we find in this morning's Gospel Lesson: It is a verse that points solidly to Jesus as the hope of our lives. It does not speak of the merit or worthiness of our lives, but of the goodness of our Lord Jesus:

So if *the Son* makes you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:36, RSV)

Likewise with the *Agnus Dei*. Liturgical manuals suggest that for simple liturgies, like our Wednesday evening liturgy, it is okay to omit the "Lamb of God." But I never omit it, as far as I can remember. I love this simple, ancient, threefold pointing to Jesus as our Savior:

Lamb of God, *you* take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away *the sin* of the world; have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take way the sin of *the world*; grant us peace.

It is as one of our hymns says, "No merit of my own I claim, but wholly rest on Jesus' name":

My hope is built on nothing less

Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
No merit of my own I claim,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand
All other ground is sinking sand. (LBW 294)

THE PARCHED SOUL

But now, let the pendulum swing away from the dark and frightened age of Luther to our more modern age. For us, on average, in this season of the Church, the great spiritual issue is not so much the terrified conscience but rather the parched soul. Of course, on my deathbed, I will probably be terrified, and I sure hope that a good pastor, like my wife Carol, is there to comfort me, rather than one of those monks Luther was so mad at. But short of our deathbed, there are still spiritual needs afflicting the people of God.

For one thing, I think that many of us wonder about the *application* of the Ten Commandments in our own lives. We believe in the Commandments and want to walk in their way, but wonder sometimes how concretely to do that. We might find ourselves betwixt-and-between more than one Commandment, as when the Eighth Commandment's duty to seek "charitable interpretations of the deeds of the neighbor" conflicts with our alarm about that neighbor and our responsibility to try to protect others. Sometimes the issues are complex, with multiple responsibilities and shades of grey within the legal or institutional rules, and we are uncertain what would be the right path. We want to be good. We want to be pious, but we are not exactly sure how to go about doing that in the circumstances of our individual lives.

We are uncertain. But we cannot forever delay, because life is not like that. We have to make our choices. So, we do, all the time knowing that there might come a day when we regret our choice and have to plead for forgiveness. This is the adventure of Christian life in this fallen world. Even for people of good will, the way of the Commandments is not always clear.

HANS AND HIS SON, MARTIN

So, let me return to the old man, Hans Luther. This is a kind of case study in the puzzles of applying the holy commandments of God to our own individual lives.

It turns out that Martin Luther, the son, was puzzled about the Fourth Commandment. There came a definite time in his life when he wanted to obey that Commandment, but was unsure how to do it. In the end, he had to confess that he had missed the mark. He had failed to honor his father and his mother. He was a good young man, a pious young man, a man who deeply desired to walk in the ways of the Ten Commandments. Yet he was confused by it all, and in the end he judged that he had sinned. Here is the story.

Hans and Margarete Luther had a brilliant son, Martin. The son grew up in a frugal, stern household, but not unlike other households in the high middle ages. Hans loved his children. He prayed at their bedside. After his father's death, Luther recalled the good times with him and testified that, next to God, all "I am and have" he owed to his father's love.¹

Hans's father, Heinz Luther, the grandfather of Martin Luther, had been a farmer. According to the law of the land, Hans Luther, as one of the older sons, was not entitled to the inheritance.² That meant that the paternal farm went to one of the brothers, and Hans had to go out and make his own way in the world. He became a copper miner and eventually an owner or co-owner of a copper smelting shop.

Luther thought of himself as the son of a miner. Luther was baptized in the church of Saints Peter and Paul in Eisleben, Germany. The baptism probably took place in the tower chapel of that church. In it there is a large handcrafted and painted altar dedicated to St. Anne. The predella depicts the birth of Christ.

Here at Immanuel, I think that this part of our rear altarpiece is the predella – these three panels with the Sanctus painted on them: Holy, Holy, Holy. But in the tower chapel where Luther was baptized, the panels showed scenes of the Christmas story. Now, here is a charming thing about that: The shepherds in the Christmas story wear the garb and carry the lamps of miners."³ Copper miners. I love that. The artist has incorporated his generation into the painting. It serves as an invitation to the people to place themselves into the Christmas story, which is something we should all try to do. Let's place ourselves into the great story of Jesus!

So, Luther's father was a copper miner, like many people in that part of Germany. He was a hard worker, a frugal man, and a man willing to take on the risks of becoming an entrepreneur. He borrowed money—lots of it—and leased his own smelting business.

This meant that Hans became vulnerable to labor demands, to the physical challenges of obtaining copper ore from the ground, taxes on his profit, interest on his loans, the ebb and flow of copper prices in Europe, and the uncertainties of taking his stand from time to time before the courts of justice. Sometimes Hans prospered. Sometimes he fell back into debt.

If you read Luther's commentary on the Fourth Commandment, you would never guess that Luther himself had any reservations about that commandment or any failures in walking in the way of that commandment. He is relentless in defending mother and father and in urging that they should be obeyed – not just loved, but obeyed:

¹ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation (Volume 1: 1483-1521)*. Translated by James L. Schaaf. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis. 1981. English translation 1985), page 7.

² Brecht, Volume 1, page 2.

³ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation (Volume 1: 1483-1521)*. Translated by James L. Schaaf. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis. 1981. English translation 1985), pages 1-2.

It must therefore be impressed on young people that they revere their parents as God's representatives, and to remember that, however lowly, poor, feeble, and eccentric they may be, they are still their mother and father, given by God. They are not to be deprived of their honor because of their ways or failings... You are to esteem them above all things and to value them as the most precious treasure on earth...in your words you are also to behave respectfully toward them and are not to speak discourteously to them, to criticize them, or to take them to task, but rather to submit to them and hold your tongue, even if they go too far...you are also to honor them by your actions, that is, with your body and possessions, serving them, helping them, and caring for them when they are old, sick, feeble, or poor; all this you should do not only cheerfully, but also with humility and reverence, doing it as if for God.

So, Luther is clear *in his teaching* about the Fourth Commandment. Mother and father are to be honored, loved, and obeyed. But *in his own life*, he disobeyed his parents in a major way – a way having to do with the whole direction of his life. I refer to Luther's decision to becoming a monk. The old father, Hans, had wanted Luther to become a lawyer, but in an instant, Luther threw away his promising law studies and entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt, Germany. He got caught in that summer thunderstorm in the meadow. Thunder crashed, lightning struck near him, young Luther let out the cry, "St. Anne save me. I'll become a monk." She saved him and he became a monk.

Now here is the interesting thing. Hans, the father, considered young Luther's decision to be rash and immature and asked Luther to return to law school. Now, it is showtime. There is no ambiguity in the old man. He makes it clear that he wants Luther to leave the monastery.

Luther refused to leave. I don't think it could be said that Luther no longer believed the Fourth Commandment. It was rather that he was uncertain how to apply that commandment in his life. For you see, once he joined the monastery, he fell under the authority of another father – his confessor, John Staupitz. Staupitz was a great man. He seemed to be a true representative of our heavenly Father in the life of young Martin Luther.

So, Luther was betwixt-and-between fathers. There was his true father, Hans, but also there was his spiritual father, Staupitz. Luther chose Staupitz. He remained in the monastery. The Augustinians sent him to study and to teach theology, and the rest is history. Luther went on to write important theology, including that passage I lifted up about the condemned prisoner and the consolation of the bound conscience.

As for the old man, Hans, by fits and starts he finally became reconciled to his son's vocation as a priest and theologian. Sixteen years later, Luther wrote a letter

of apology to his father and admitted that he had sinned against the Fourth Commandment and against his parents by entering the monastery. As a mature theologian, Luther looked back on his youthful decision and regretted it:

...had I known it, I would never have attempted to become a monk without your knowledge and consent, even though I had to die many deaths. For my vow was not worth a fig, since by taking it I withdrew myself from the authority and guidance of the parent [to whom I was subject] by God's commandment; indeed, it was a wicked vow, and proved that it was not of God not only because it was a sin against your authority, but because it was not absolutely free and voluntary.

Luther wrote this apology as a preface to one of his books. He wrote it in Latin. I hope that someone read it aloud and translated it for old father Hans.

TAKE YOUR STEP!

For each of us at some point in our life, we might be uncertain how to go about being a good Christian. It can be with piety as St. Paul says it is with prayer:

...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. (Romans 8:26, RSV)

Sometimes this is so with Christian daily life too. Sometimes we can but lower our heads and cry to the Lord that we do not know the right path to walk.

But then, I say, walk on! Give it your best shot to do what you believe Christ wants you to do. That is what Luther did, and the Lord blessed the Church through Luther's earnest attempt to follow Christ. The Lord lives! He is well able to bring good from the decisions we make as best we can and offer up to him. Luther's teaching on the consolation of the troubled conscience is meant for you too – for anyone who twists in the wind and wonders what step to take next. Take your step. Give it your best shot to do what Christ wants you to do. And do not worry overmuch. You are not saved by the excellence of your decisions, but by our Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.