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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/5/2017, the Fifth Wednesday in Lent

PRAYER OF THE DAY (for Lent 5)

☞ Almighty God, our Redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

These evening's session is about the gentleness of speech we find in the JD.

SCRIPTURE..... 1 Peter 3:13-16, RSV

¹³Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; ¹⁶and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

As we sing this evening's hymn, I hope we will especially pay attention to verse 3. It is a verse that tries to walk that difficult path of speaking the truth with love.

LBW 504

"O God, My Faithful God"

WAS FRAG ICH NACH DER WELT

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In these midweek Lent sessions, we are taking a look at the 1999 ecumenical statement called "Joint Declaration on Justification." It is a substantial step forward in mending the sixteenth century breach of Christ's one church on earth.

What I want to do this evening is to talk about a method of speech that helped make the JD possible. The method I have in mind is beautifully expressed in Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment – the Commandment that says, "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (Exodus 20:16, KJV). Luther's famous explanation goes this way:

We should fear and love God, and so we should not tell lies about our neighbor, nor betray, slander, or defame him, but should apologize for him, speak well of him, and interpret charitably all that he does.¹

What the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church have tried to do in the JD is to earnestly give charitable interpretations of the teachings of each other's church.

This is not an insane way to search for the truth. The path of love in our speech is often the best path toward discovering the truth.

Over breakfast the other day, our seminary intern for this coming year, Caleb Douglas, spoke of a famous textbook of medieval theology called the *Sentences* by Peter Lombard. Lombard composed the *Sentences* around 1150 A.D. and they remained a standard text of theological education for centuries afterwards. Indeed, one could not enter upon a theological vocation without demonstrating competence in the *Sentences*. Even Martin Luther, in the sixteenth century, earned a bachelor's degree in the *Sentences* by Peter Lombard. That was in 1509.

The interesting thing about the *Sentences* is that Lombard compiled authoritative statements on Bible passages, from St. Augustine and other church fathers, and he placed them side-by-side even when the statements seemed contrary. That is, at first glance, it would seem that the statements were incompatible and that they could not all be true. To be a master of theology, then, meant that one had to be able to give charitable interpretations of the *Sentences*. That is, one needed to know enough about the theological positions of the church fathers that one could understand and teach others that the apparently contrary positions were not contrary after all.

In a way, that is what the JD has done. It has been carried along by the conviction that if we would pause and enter charitably into the theological position of our opponent, we will probably find that our opponent is onto something – our opponent has some handle on the truth.

I once heard an important lecture by an honored German Catholic Luther scholar named Otto Pesch. Think of that string of words: an honored German Catholic Luther scholar. That he is German is good, because Luther was German, and so Pesch had an advantage with Luther's language. That he was an *honored Catholic Luther scholar* means that he did not ruin his career in the Catholic Church by devoting himself to the study of Martin Luther. Pesch is now of blessed memory, but his tradition of sympathetic Catholic scholarship on Luther continues to this day. In fact, last summer's NALC

¹Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church* (343). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

theology convocation included a lecture by a contemporary Catholic Luther scholar – a charming man named Mickey Maddox.

So, back in the 1990s, I heard a lecture by the honored German Catholic Luther scholar Otto Pesch. This was at one of the Luther/Aquinas conferences organized by Bishop Michael McDaniel, of blessed memory, down in North Carolina.

Now, Dr. Pesch was honored for his learning in two areas in particular: He was an Aquinas scholar *and* he was a Luther scholar. The thing that struck me about Dr. Pesch's lecture was his theme that learning about a theologian is like learning another language. Over the course of his life, Pesch felt, and other theologians agreed, that Pesch had learned both languages. He had learned Aquinas and Luther. Few of us are in that position, but he was, and he could report something valuable to us: he told us that positions that initially seemed contrary in Aquinas and Luther are not contrary once you have learned both languages. When you have learned both Aquinas and Luther, you discover that there is much harmony between them. They are both part of a fine theological tradition. In fact, Pesch concluded...

...that Luther was a Catholic and “one of the greatest witnesses to the Christian faith and a gift to all Christendom.”²

That is from a respected Catholic theologian.

This seems to have been the stance of the theologians who produced the JD. They approached their work with the happy hope that they would discover unity with the other side. They did discover such unity and that is what they report in the JD.

In this evening's handout, I have included paragraphs 40 through the beginning of 43. These paragraphs talk about “The Significance and Scope of the Consensus Reached.” I am not going to linger with each of these paragraphs, but I would like to lift up the concluding sentence of paragraph 40:

40. The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification described in paras. 18 to 39 are acceptable.

² <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1987/10/the-remission-of-martin-luther>

Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths.
(my emphasis)

41. Thus the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration.

42. Nothing is thereby taken away from the seriousness of the condemnations related to the doctrine of justification. Some were not simply pointless. They remain for us “salutary warnings” to which we must attend in our teaching and practice.³

43. Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches. Here it must prove itself.

Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths. For Lent, this is an attitude I think I can recommend in general to us: that “in our differences” from one another, we nonetheless should be “open to one another” and try with all our might to not destroy unity in basic truths -- try not to deny salvation to our opponent and the love of Christ for that one.

Such is the path of Jesus Christ himself. St. Peter praises him for it and commends the example of Jesus to us:

²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²²He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:21-23, RSV)

³Condemnations of the Reformation Era, 27.

Let us, then, forsake all guile in our speech and all reviling, and maybe we will discover that our opponent is not so bad after all. We might even draw closer to the truth, which means drawing closer to our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.