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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Luther: A Consecrated Man

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

In today's Gospel Lesson for Reformation Sunday, Jesus speaks of freedom. His words go this way:

³⁴Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues for ever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."
(John 8:34, RSV)

One thing we can say about Martin Luther for sure is that he did not want to be a slave to sin. He counted himself free, day by day, moment by moment, to be true to Jesus Christ. Luther is Lutheranism's great teacher.

Martin Luther was a fallible man, but also a consecrated man. I mean to spend a few words on his imperfect Christian character, but then press on to my main point: Luther was a consecrated man. When he was an infant, his parents presented him to Christ, that he might be Christ's man. They did that when they presented their young son for Holy Baptism. As Luther grew up and then on to old age, Luther dedicated himself to Jesus Christ. He tried to live in accordance with his Baptism. He tried in fact to be Christ's man in this world. So, two sides to Luther. He was a fallible man, but also a consecrated man. I hope that such a thing can be said of you and me too, that we are not yet perfect, and yet we have consecrated ourselves to Christ.

First, then, a few words about Luther's imperfect Christian character. Here I am thinking mainly of his explosive use of words. The man could be dynamite in his use of language. It is odd that Luther could be so destructive with his words because Luther is the one who taught us to seek what he called "charitable interpretations of the deeds of our neighbors." That is part of his explanation of the Eighth Commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Luther taught that there is no true understanding of the Ten Commandments unless we understand them to be commandments of love. And so, it is not sufficient that we should refrain from lying about our neighbor, but also, more positively, we should seek charitable interpretations of the deeds of our neighbor.

Yet Luther called the Pope the "Antichrist," and that was not a charitable interpretation of the deeds of the Pope. In his address "To the Christian

Nobility of the German Nation,” written in 1520, Luther spoke of the Pope as the most sinful of humans:

Hear this, O pope, not of all men the holiest but of all men the most sinful! O that God from heaven would soon destroy your throne and sink it in the abyss of hell! ¹

Later that same year, he acknowledges that he has called the Pope the Antichrist, and that he has even wondered whether he has gone too far in that, but concludes that he has not:

I, one man alone, have dared to come forward against the pope, brand him as the Antichrist, the bishops as his apostles, and the universities as his brothels! How often did my heart quail, punish me, and reproach me with its single strongest argument: Are you the only wise man? Can it be that all the others are in error and have erred for so long a time? What if you are mistaken and lead so many people into error who might all be eternally damned? Finally, Christ with his clear, unmistakable Word strengthened and confirmed me, so that my heart no longer quails, but resists the arguments of the papists, as a stony shore resists the waves, and laughs at their threats and storms!²

That is quite a charge to make against the Pope or against anyone: to say of that person that he or she is the Antichrist — the very incarnation of Satan on earth. But Luther does that, and in doing so, violates his rule about seeking charitable interpretations of the deeds of our neighbors. As a matter of historical sequence, Luther formulated his rule about charitable interpretations ten years later than this quote from 1520. Still, as far as I can tell, Luther never repented of his conviction about the Pope being the Antichrist.

But it is chiefly in his old-age writings against the Jews that we find Luther to be a fallible man. His writings against the Jews are so powerful and so awful that I do not even want to quote from them. In my opinion, the Lutheran World Federation, the Missouri Synod, and other Lutheran groups across the world have been right in officially repudiating Luther’s writings against the Jews.

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 193.

² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 134.

So, when I say that Luther was a fallible man, I am not kidding. Luther was not a pretend sinner. He was an actual one.

And yet, Luther was also a consecrated man. Such as he was, he tried to serve Christ. He tried to get better. He tried to place himself in a context that would help him to become better. And he tried to serve Christ not only in big church matters, but also in the daily domestic duties of life. So, we can take the measure of Luther's consecration in three ways: (1) Let me speak of Luther as a man of prayer, in which he earnestly placed himself in a context in which he could become a better follower of Christ. Then, (2) I mean to speak of Luther's teaching on the spiritual progress of the Christian. Luther taught that coming to faith in Jesus Christ launches us into a lifelong daily struggle to be true to him — a struggle in which we should aim to become more perfect in our walk with Jesus. And finally, (3) let me say a few words about Luther's last will and testament. It should give me a chance to speak of a consecrated life even in the domestic duties of life.

First, Luther as a man of prayer. In a fairly recent book about Luther, theologian Phillip Cary states a nice principle that describes Luther and his consecrated life. Phillip's line goes this way:

If you want to learn a song by heart, you don't listen to your heart but to the song...³

That describes Luther perfectly. Luther, you know, was a great hymn writer. We will sing some of his hymns in today's liturgy, including the hymn we just sang, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." So, Luther knew and wrote plenty of songs. But for Luther himself, his chief song was the holy Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus is what he listened to. The story of Jesus is the song he tried to learn by heart.

We see this in Luther's prayer life. The Luther historian Martin Brecht reports that "Luther spent at least three of the best hours of the day in prayer."⁴ This is one measure of Luther's consecrated life. He was a man of prayer. When I was young, I wondered how any human being could spend three hours in prayer. But Luther wrote about his *method* of prayer, and then I understood. For Luther, prayer and the Bible are closely entwined. In fact, Luther's way of reading the Bible could be called "a prayerful reading of scripture." When Luther prayed, he paid God the courtesy of listening to Him first. That is how a conversation goes. One person begins and the other gives answer. For Luther, he began prayer by listening to God in the Bible. He treasured the catechism, which he considered to be a brief summary of the

³ Cary, Phillip. *The Meaning of Protestant Theology: Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel That Gives Us Christ* (p. 193). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Martin Brecht. *Martin Luther 1521-1532: Shaping and Defining the Reformation* (Kindle Locations 6299-6301). Kindle Edition.

faith of the church. He treasured the catechism because it was a chief text for his life of prayer. It was a chief song he tried to learn by heart. So, in his *Table Talk* around the supper table, Luther once said this:

Thus the catechism remains lord, and there is nobody who understands it. I am accordingly compelled to pray it every day, even aloud, and whenever I happen to be prevented by the press of duties from observing my hour of prayer, the entire day is bad for me. Prayer helps us very much and gives us a cheerful heart, not on account of any merit in the work, but because we have spoken with God and found everything to be in order.⁵

Earlier I mentioned that Luther wrote about his method of prayer. He speaks of his method in a short treatise called *A Simple Way to Pray* (LW 43:187ff). In that little book, we find that Luther constructs his prayers by approaching the Bible passage in four different ways. First, he considers the passage as a textbook, with things to teach him, and he offers those lessons in prayer, asking that the Lord correct him if he has gotten the lessons wrong. He then considers the passage as a book of confession, teaching him things he should confess in his prayers. He then considers the passage as a hymnbook, teaching him concrete reasons for praising God. And finally, he considers the passage as a prayer book, teaching him to offer petitions that he might not otherwise have thought about.

Anyway, my point now about Luther as a man of prayer is that it is a measure of his consecrated life. He worked hard at being Christ's man.

Second, another measure of Luther's consecrated life is that he cautioned himself and he cautioned others that being baptized is just the start of a great Christian adventure. It is the start of an adventure in which we never really know rest until we reach heaven. Luther taught that in this fallen world, our faith and our discipleship are contested. They are under assault from the world, from the cries of our own flesh, and from the devil. Therefore, a Christian must not coast. A consecrated life means continual struggle to walk more closely with Jesus. We find much of this in Luther's exposition of the Sixth Commandment — "And lead us not into temptation." For example, we read this:

As long as we remain in this vile life, where we are attacked, hunted, and harried on all sides, we are constrained to cry out and pray every hour that God may not allow us to become faint and weary and to fall back

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 54: Table Talk*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 17.

into sin, shame, and unbelief. Otherwise it is impossible to overcome even the smallest attack. Accordingly we Christians must be armed and expect every day to be under continuous attack. Then we will not go about securely and heedlessly as if the devil were far from us, but will at all times expect his blows and fend them off. Even if at present I am chaste, patient, kind, and firm in faith, the devil is likely at this very hour to send such an arrow into my heart that I can scarcely endure, for he is an enemy who never lets up or becomes weary; when one attack ceases, new ones always arise. (Luther, Large Catechism)

Luther's warning here about our faith being under assault fits with his famous teaching about the meaning of Baptism for our daily lives. His words go this way:

It [Baptism] signifies that the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

This business about “daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live,” these are the words of someone who is not coasting, but rather consecrating his life to the Lord.

Finally, let me speak briefly about Luther and the consecrated life in daily domestic duties. Part of a holy life is that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Well, let's take a peek at one of Luther's closest neighbors — his wife, Katie. In one sense, the Luther household was chaos. They lived in a large building, they were a large family, with a hurly-burley of folks coming and going. The Luthers lived in a monastery — the abandoned Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg. It was a big place and it was often filled with people — with visiting clergy and theologians, seminarians, university colleagues, friends, Luther and Katie and their children, plus relatives of the family.⁶ Money was usually in short supply.

Church Historian Martin Brecht reports that Katie sometimes complained about this. He writes this:

Occasionally Katy complained that her husband, unlike some of his colleagues, was not interested in increasing

⁶ Martin Brecht. Martin Luther The Preservation of the Church Vol 3 1532-1546 (Kindle Locations 3944-3945). Kindle Edition.

his income. Luther continued to refuse any honoraria for his books [and he wrote many, many books] and advice. He thought he had enough. In trust that God would make everything come out right, he helped others as God had helped him.⁷

In fact, for quite a while Luther declined to write a will because he figured that he would have no money to give away. Well, he never did have much money. And yet he did write a will. He did it to protect Katie.

The Saxon inheritance laws back in those days did not much provide for the widow. The laws permitted the widow to inherit only her dowry and personal belongings. The house and the property would not belong to the widow but to the children.⁸

But this did not seem just to Luther. Katie had helped build their life together. Luther did not want Katie to be dependent on the generosity of their children and spouses. So, he wrote a will specifying that his estate was to go to Katie, trusting her to take care of the children.

Again, Luther did not have much wealth to leave. In his will, he says this:

...I have built and bought so much, and I ran such a big and burdensome household, that among other things I must acknowledge it as an extraordinary, remarkable blessing that I have been able to manage. The miracle is not that there is no ready money but that there is not a greater debt. (from Luther's Will, LW 34)

Life was hard for Katie after Luther died. Luther had encouraged her to sell the monastery and other property they owned and to move into smaller quarters, but she refused to do that. Still, she was better off than she would have been because Luther wrote his will.

Two things strike me about this domestic story. Both of them are part of a consecrated life: First, Luther was generous toward others, even though his generosity meant that he would never become a wealthy man. And second, he wrote his will. You might think that a small matter, but it is not. Luther did not fear death so much that he refused to deal with its reality. He loved his wife from beginning to end, and it is part of a consecrated life to do the best you can to take care of your neighbors, including your closest neighbor, your spouse.

There is never enough time on Reformation Sunday to preach about all the various ways in which Martin Luther tried serve Jesus Christ and to serve his

⁷ Martin Brecht. Martin Luther The Preservation of the Church Vol 3 1532-1546 (Kindle Locations 4001-4003). Kindle Edition.

⁸ Luther's Will, 1542, Translated and introduction by Lewis W. Spitz (LW 34)

neighbors. But I have lifted up these three ways in which Luther wrestled against falling back in to the slavery of sin: He was a man of prayer. He kept himself on guard against temptation and encouraged others to do the same. And he attended to the practicalities of love in his domestic life.

In our reading from Jeremiah, the prophet spoke of a new heart — a better heart (Jeremiah 31:31-34). He said that the days are coming when God will put a new heart in each of us. It was part of Luther's consecrated life that he earnestly tried to develop a good heart in the sixty-two years granted to him on this earth. He tried to live a fitting life for one who was hoping and praying for the return of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.