

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season October 25, 2020 – Reformation Sunday

*We have two special Sundays in these later days of Pentecost – For Lutherans and some Protestants, we observe Reformation Sunday, the last Sunday in October, as a chance to remember the reform of the church – associated with Martin Luther posting his **95 Theses**. The reform that put God’s grace in the center of our understanding of our relationship with God. With most of the Church, we remember the saints on the First Sunday of November as All Saints Sunday. We give thanks for the witness of all those whose lives were touched by God’s grace and gave us a chance to see God’s grace in action. Here is a message from Pastor Steve for Reformation Sunday. A tape of the service will be made available. We will also make available a tape of a special **Reformation Vesper Service**. Thanks to our organist, Lawrence Baker and the musicians he assembled for this special presentation. Please share the link with friends!*

Lessons for Reformation Sunday

Jer. 31:31-34; Psalm 46; John 8:31-36

“Das war ein Hammer!” Pastor Friedlich Schorlemmer began his Reformation Day sermon in the Castle Church with these words: “Das was ein Hammer!” - ‘That was a hammer!’ Jean and I smiled at his clever allusion to Martin Luther’s legendary act of posting his *95 Theses* on that very Castle Church door with a hammer in 1517. We had already learned - Schorlemmer was a wordsmith.

A few days later, Pastor Schorlemmer stopped by our office and asked if we would translate his Reformation Day sermon into English. We did such translating work as a courtesy to our German church partners. We liked the challenge of translating – knowing it involved more than just looking up words in a dictionary. So, we said. “Yes”.

His text arrived and we were immediately challenged by his opening phrase: “Das war ein Hammer!” Our Reformation Day smiles disappeared as we began wrestling with those 4 words. In contemporary German, the phrase has a rich meaning. It conveys much more than pounding a few nails into a wooden door. Friends might talk about an incredible party they had: “Das war ein Hammer!”. Or people might share the news of the sudden death of an acquaintance: “Das war ein Hammer!” In current German usage, the phrase refers to an occasion, an event, or a moment that is memorable, that moves a person, that causes a person to shake or shudder with great emotion. Something like: “That was really something!”

“Das war ein Hammer!” - Schorlemmer had cleverly described Luther’s dramatic act that challenged the church and its understanding of grace in 16th century German with a 4-word, 21st century German phrase. We knew it was clever but how could we succinctly render its cleverness to our 21st Century English speaking audience. “That was really something!”? The phrase has four words but is woefully inadequate to convey the meaning of Schorlemmer’s phrase: there was just no hammer in it, literally or figuratively. After great discussion among our team that included a German colleague – we began the English translation with the sentence: “That was a hammer!” Alas, we had no footnote to explain ourselves – what a hammer!

Our translation adventure was a reminder that the task of the Church has always been one of translation. Translating the message of God’s love shown to us in Jesus – in his life, in his Cross, in his resurrection – has always been the Church’s mission. Luther embraced the challenge of translating the message of a gracious God to his fellow Germans. One of Luther’s contributions was to produce a German translation of the Bible – translating the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts. But Luther had to do more than translate Hebrew and Greek words into German

words in order to translate the Gospel message for the people of his day. It turned out, he also needed translation work for himself.

Jesus tells us today, “The truth shall set you free.” We can be sure that Luther knew this verse very well, “Die Wahrheit wird euch frei machen.” We can be sure that Luther knew that Jesus, who spoke these words, died on the Cross. We can be sure Luther knew a lot about the Bible and faith. Yet, Luther was not able to land on the ‘truth’ that set him free.

Luther had been raised in the church and learned that his work in life was to be a good follower of Jesus – “Do this and you are set free”. So he tried, and he tried to do good, to be good. He even left the world and all its temptations, leaving behind a career in the law that would have made him wealthy and his father happy. In 1505, he walked away from his legal studies in Erfurt to knock on the door of the Augustinian monastery. He had no hammer back then, but he knocked on that door seeking relief from the truth that he understood at his core – he was not good, he could not be good enough for Jesus. He hoped the confines of a restricted monastic life would free him from his prison of fear and guilt, his prison of doubt and despair. Free him from the truth that Luther knew for sure – he was a sinner! But it did not - even 6 hours a day in the confessional could not free him. Jesus had said: “the truth will set you free”. But Luther could not find that truth. Das war ein Hammer!

Luther had to go back to those scriptures. More so, he had to go back to Jesus. He had to go back to look at that crucifix that hung in his monk’s cell. There was Jesus on the Cross. Jesus was there because of sin, because of sinners, because of him, Martin Luther. That truth had always been a dead end for Luther. Luther recalled: “I hated that word “righteousness of God,” ... I had been taught to understand God’s righteousness as the righteousness by which God punishes the unrighteous sinner.” Luther knew he was that unrighteous sinner. Finally, for Luther, there was a breakthrough: “At last, by the mercy of God”, he said, “ ... I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a *gift of God*, namely by faith.” Luther looked again upon the Cross of Jesus and saw the Gift from God – the gift to be embraced by faith. Luther saw the Cross as God’s act of love toward all – all sinners. Luther had been led to the truth that set him free: He would later say: “I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

Luther could not wait to share the Good News of the One who sets us free. In his early days at Wittenberg, he served as a pastor at the Town Church. As pastor, Luther would hear the people in the confessional booth. He realized how much the people needed to be freed from their sins. At one point, he became quite perturbed, though, when people started coming to confession with greater confidence, not because of a new-found faith in Jesus, but because of a newly purchased piece of paper called an *indulgence*. Luther was angry - his Church would not proclaim the Good News of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as the free gift of God that it was. Instead, it raised money by emphasizing the bad news of God’s judgment that drove them to buy life insurance policies, called indulgences, to relieve their fear and guilt. One interesting note – his **95 Theses** were written in Latin for his University colleagues. The folks he heard in the confessional had no idea what he hammered on the church door. It was not until about half a year later, when Luther preached in German, the people’s language, a sermon on indulgences and grace that the people understood. Das war ein Hammer!

When you understand the message about God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ, when the Good News is translated for you so that you understand it: “That is a hammer!” We live in a different day and time from Luther. Fear and guilt of God may not be imprisoning people in our

day. I do think we live with a lot of fears. Not just about COVID or our politics. I think we live with a lot of insecurity about *who we are* – which translates into insecurity about *whose we are*.

Our world too often measures us by our achievements, our accomplishments, our possessions. One place we can see this is social media. Let me say, I recognize the value of social media – it does help keep us connected, but we stay connected with posts and pictures, *curated posts and pictures*, that present beautiful families, happy friends celebrating life events, incredible trips and vacations, luscious meals, clever household projects, cute kids and grandkids – even pets, It is great to share all these good things, but what happens when we have no happy picture to share, no snapshot of our success? What if the pictures from our lives do not seem to measure up? What do we do with our failures and missteps, our demotions or let downs on social media? Do you know these initials: FOMO. It means the *fear of missing out* – a modern phenomenon fueled by social media. We try to manage our lives and then comes the pressure that there is something more to do or to see or to experience. Like Luther we are striving for something we cannot achieve. Our lives will never be full enough, never be good enough!

We have Good News – Good News to share and to translate: We are the children of a gracious God. The Good News is that our identity is not what we create with pictures on Facebook. The truth is: Our identity is in Christ. Our identity comes to us in Baptism. Our identity is that we are redeemed children of God. God has seen all the pictures from our lives – not just the ones we want to post. God knows that we fall short in our attempts to be good. God knows we have sinned. Because of God's love, our identity is not defined by what we missed, what we messed up. Our identity is defined by God in Jesus. The truth is: God has a gift for us – Jesus Christ the only Son. Through Christ come the gifts of grace, mercy, and forgiveness -- a new start every day.

This is the truth. This was the truth for Martin Luther who was freed from his self-made prison of what he thought he deserved from God. This is the truth for us. This is the truth we are called to translate into words to share with others. We have been set free, set free to share the freedom we have in Christ, set free to share the Good News. This is a hammer. Das ist ein hammer!

Amen.