

“Liberated by God’s Grace”

A message delivered at
St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury, ON

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500th Anniversary of the Reformation

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When I was asked, to present a reflection on the Reformation from the perspective of a Catholic theologian, the words of Rev. Dr. Allen Jorgenson’s words at the Nord500North commemoration of the reformation in September came to mind. Dr. Jorgensen, a professor of systematic theology at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary insisted that “to talk about reformation without talking about ecumenism is a dangerous thing. At the heart of the ecumenical movement,” he reminded us, “is the conviction that despite any differences, deep seated and shared convictions make possible genuine dialogue.”

Long before today, St. Andrew’s United Church already welcomed me, and my ecumenical family as, “despite the differences,” you recognized “the deep-seated shared convictions” as my son Lachlan affirmed his Christian faith before you this past June. Lachlan and Melody would be here this morning; however, their faith journey continues with other youth of Manitou Conference at the Niagara Youth Festival. It is to me then, to continue this dialogue with the deep-seated conviction that Jesus’ commandment, “that they may be one” is fulfilled today, in the hearing of it.

When Bill and I met to discuss how I might approach today’s reflection, he thought that a reflection on the Francis effect and the ongoing reformation of the Church might be a good place to start. As a post-Vatican II Catholic, I thought this a good idea. Francis has made a huge impact on the universal church, even though to begin with, he may have got off on the wrong foot.

As the story goes, “One day when Francis went out to meditate in the fields he was passing by the church of San Damiano which was threatening to collapse because of extreme age. Inspired by the Spirit, he went inside to pray. Kneeling before an image of Christ on the cross, he was filled with great fervor and consolation. As he prayed, with tears welling up in his eyes, his vision blurred and he heard a voice coming from the cross, repeat three times,

“Francis go and repair my house which, as you see, is falling into ruin.”

So, commissioned by Christ himself, Francis returned to his home where he sold some of his father’s assets to purchase the materials he would need to repair the decrepit church. His Father was so angered that he disowned and disinherited him.

With the protection of his bishop, Francis then went back to San Damiano, setting hammer to nail as he began the laborious task of fixing the church. As he continued his labour, Francis had a niggling, perhaps inspired by the Holy Spirit. I imagine this moment of clarity might have dawned on like the scene from Bugs Bunny where the Sheriff of Nottingham realizes he’s been duped by Bugs into building on royal land:

1. Slide of Video

With a palm plant for emphasis, he might have exclaimed, “Ooooooh! He meant the repair my house as in “the universal Church purchased with Christ’s blood, which is suffering from inside scandal and avarice as well as outside heresies” house. That rascally rabbit.

According to the hagiography, Jesus wanted St. Francis of Assisi to ignite a return to the Faith and a renewed devotion to Christ’s Heart in a world that was desperately lost and weary. A mission Luther would take up, albeit more divisively some 300 years later, and Pope Francis, some 500 years later still.

I don’t think it is an accident that in this year of commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of Luther’s reformation, we in the Catholic church are experiencing a second Francis effect. Although no one but Francis can know for certain why he chose this first Francis the Reformer’s name, I imagine a scene similar to Francis of Assisi’s prayer at San Damiano unfolding in the what is called “The Room of Tears” or as it’s more popularly known, “The Crying Room,” where Cardinal Bergoglio, now Francis, changed from his cardinal-a-tial red to the papal white.

“I have little doubt” Joseph McAuley of the *Jesuit Review: America* writes, “that in the quiet of this moment or in the presence of his Lord in the chapel of Santa Marta, Pope Francis examined his life since that momentous evening when he gave his *Yes*. And there is no doubt that he prayed for courage, an ever-more trusting faith and the endurance to fulfill his duties as best he can in service to the church.” The reformer that emerged from the Room of Tears, who from the Balcony asked us to bless him, before he blessed us, suggests to me that this second Francis too heard the spirit call,

“Francis, go and repair my house which, as you see, is falling into ruin.”

If you listen carefully, you can hear the spirit’s whisper to the church to repair her house in Pope Francis’s participation in the first ever joint-commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in Lund Sweden in 2017.

You can hear the spirits whisper in the resolution of the centuries old debate over justification by faith through the adoption of The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Lutheran’s and Roman Catholics in 1999, the World Methodist Council in 2006, The World Communion of Reformed Churches this past year, and during the upcoming Reformation commemoration at Westminster Abbey on 31 October, by Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of the Anglican Communion. Of this most recent whisper, my former professor of church history, The Reverend Canon Dr John Gibaut, Director of Unity, Faith and Order for the Anglican Communion, says:

“During the historic 2017 anniversary, Anglicans rejoice in the extraordinary achievement that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification represents as a sign of healing after 500 years of division.”

All these are signs that with Francis, we who make up the one body of Christ are recognizing, as Allen Jorgenson reminded us, that, “At the heart of the ecumenical movement is the conviction that despite any differences, deep seated and shared convictions make possible genuine dialogue.”

It is out of this conviction that Christians from across northeastern Ontario committed to 5 ecumenical imperatives as we continue our reformation journey together. While all

5 are worthy of reflection, the first imperative, “Christians should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division,” has particular resonance for me.

Far too often we begin encounters with our sisters and brothers of Christ who are of a different denomination from the perspective of differences that divide us, rather than commonalities that unite. In the spirit of theological autobiography, I’d like to share a story from my wife Melody and my first date to illustrate this perspective.

Melody and I met at Queen’s Theological College in Kingston, Ontario where she was beginning her studies towards an Masters of Divinity Degree and eventual ordination, and I was beginning a Masters of Theological Studies which would lead to further graduate studies in theology. Being serious theologues, our first date was to go to church together. For no particular ecumenical, liturgical or theological reason, we chose to go to Mass at St. Dismas Roman Catholic Church. The church was named after the prisoner whom on the Cross, Christ declared, “Today you will join me in paradise.” Entering the century old church built from limestone hued by prisoners from the then-newly opened maximum-security penitentiary, we were met by the parish priest and a Franciscan friar who was leading a parish mission. As we found our pew, hoping to impress Melody, I told her that we were in for a treat as Franciscans are known for their passionate preaching.

The Gospel reading for the day was from Matthew 25: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Those who know me know this is one of my favourite gospel stories. That, with the context of worshiping in a church built by prisoners, gave me hope that Melody would be introduced to the best of Catholic social teachings, often referred to as the Church’s best kept secret.

As the friar mounted the raised ambo, perhaps in anticipation of what I’ve discussed as the ‘Francises effect,” I was expecting a sermon in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi.

[Slide: Dan Horan Slide].

Little did I know the Franciscan’s are a diverse bunch of preachers.

[Slide: Fiery Preacher Slide]

After reading the gospel with a fiery zeal, the friar slammed the book of Gospels shut, rose, no to my mind, soared up in the pulpit bringing his fist down hard on the ambo and in what I can only describe as an eruption of fire and brimstone declared,

“THE ENEMIES OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH WOULD DO WELL TO LEARN FROM TODAY’S GOSPEL... FOR IT IS NOT BY GRACE ALONE BUT THROUGH GOOD WORKS THAT WE ARE SAVED FROM PERDITION.”

I don’t recall much of what was said after this pronouncement only the fear that his condemnation of the enemies of the faith would be the end of our budding relationship. At the end of Mass, in place of the final procession, the parish began a 40-hour adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. The friar, followed by incense bearing altar boys and the parish

priest, processed a gold monstrance with golden rays emanating from consecrated host that had been encased in a glass dial at the centre. As an “enemy of the Catholic faith” I feared Melody would see my tradition through the lens of nearly 500 years of sometimes hateful rhetoric denouncing Catholics as nothing more than idolatrous Papists. I thought to myself, maybe a first-date Mass wasn’t such a good idea.

Thank-fully, Melody, anticipating the first imperative, chose to begin our relationship focusing on that which unites us, expressed that Sunday morning in the gospel message of liberation by God’s grace, the theme chosen by the World Lutheran Federation to commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Liberated by God’s Grace recognizes that we are first and foremost justified through faith and that it is God’s grace, freely given, by which we are saved.

The gospel we have heard today in some way sets up the gospel Melody and I heard on that day in Kingston. What, the Pharisees ask, is the greatest commandment of all? Jesus responds, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But, the righteous of Matthew 25 ask, when did we see you, when did we love you with all our heart, all our soul and with all our mind? You see, what the friar missed in his presentation is that neither righteous nor the accursed recognize the King in the least of these who are members of my family.

“Lord,” they both respond, “when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

Presumably though the Gospel is silent on the matter, both the righteous and the afflicted loved God with all their heart, with all their soul and all their mind. However, it is only through showing or not showing this love to their neighbours that they are liberated or condemned. Period. The righteous and the afflicted, in the words of the theme for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, are liberated by God’s grace. The friar would have done well to hear today’s gospel for it is this grace, freely given, that frees us to engage in Christian ministry, to feed the hungry, to visit the sick and those who are in prison. It is in doing these things that we show our love for God, whether we recognize God or not, in these in the least of these who are members of my family.

I’d like you to look around the sanctuary, at the faces in the pews, at the choir. I’d like you to imagine the Christians through-out Sudbury, and all around the world, similarly gathering as we are here. I’d like you to imagine “this great cloud of saints,” past and present, who engulf us. I’d like you to imagine all these members of God’s family. Your openness to a non-Protestant perspective on this Reformation Sunday, our worship together in this one place, the worship of the global Christian community gathered in many places, is an ecumenical experience of an ever-reforming Church, a Church that loves God with all our hearts, with all our bodies and with all our minds, and loves one another, Coptic, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, non-Christian, non-believer alike, as we love ourselves. And “On these two commandments hangs all.” AMEN