

Nine years ago, I thought Carol wanted to be the Pope when she grew up. Some context for some of you and a reminder for others, because let's be real, nine years is a long time ago. Reformation Sunday 2016 was my call sermon Sunday here, so other than a few of you, I was meeting everyone for the first time, and at that first sermon, I asked what people had wanted to be when they grew up. Carol, Kathy, and the girls were sitting in their pre-pandemic pew, right up front and Carol said she wanted to be a poet, but I heard that she wanted to be the Pope. Talk about breaking the nervous ice in the room. And now all these years later, I've scared them off to the very back of the church.

I was thinking about that Sunday a lot this week, as you are wont to do around anniversaries. The first people I met that Sunday were Pete and Joan Johnston, and they wanted to tell me that Joan had just been diagnosed with Alzheimers. The crew I would lovingly grow to call my minions, Nathan, Keegan, Lina, Emma, and Lois were eleven years old, not even in middle school yet. Elena hadn't had her first communion yet. Gerda Hudgens was sitting, graceful and poised in her pew and I already thought at the point that she would live forever. I gave you all the first of many children's chat induced panic attacks as I gave the kids signs to put up around the church, filled with new versions of the 95 theses. Many of you,

none of us even knew yet. The passing of the peace took about thirty seconds and only a few people moved around.

It was a whole different world. I mean, Scully was four years old and Sebastian was still two days away from being *born*. None of us knew what Covid-19 was, what in the world 6-7 meant (some of us still don't), Harry and Meghan were just barely dating, the Marvel universe hadn't hit Endgame yet, and there was only one Frozen, Moana, Zootopia, and Wreck-It Ralph. Tom Brady and Rob Gronkowski were still on the Patriots, Justin Verlander was still a Detroit Tiger, no one really knew who Travis Kelce was and Taylor Swift was persona non grata due to her rift with Kanye West at the MTV Music Awards. So yes, the world has changed just a smidge, the church has changed, and so have we, personally and as a community.

Nine years ago, the Lutheran church was on the cusp of turning 500. We were at a point of reflection and inflection. Where would the next 500 years call us, as a church, as a world, as disciples, as people of faith, as individuals just trying to survive in a world gone not even as crazy as would in a few more years. And so we reflected on what we wanted to be when we grew up because it was the same question the church needed to ask itself on the cusp of this huge anniversary. Who do we want to be when we grow up? What do we want the mark of the Lutheran church to be? What do we want

it to mean when we say that we're Lutherans still living in the legacy of Martin Luther? And as we're about to enter into year ten of our ministry together as a family, as the Lutheran church enters into 510 years, it's probably not a bad idea to revisit the question, because if there was anything Luther loved more than beer, it was asking questions.

We exist as the ELCA built on the foundations of a church that grew out of the insistence of not taking anything at face value, of being a people who dare to rock the boat, to challenge the status quo, and to not sit idly by when we see things going topsy turvy. I mean, we have to own, Luther was not a perfect guy, not by any means, and there is a lot of his legacy that we still have to reckon with, but he was the right man for the right time. In 1517, no one would have thought that anything other than the Catholic church could exist. It was the church of the disciples, it was the church that claimed Peter as its rock, and they were the ruling class, knit deeply within the government and every aspect of life. There was no concept of anything other than what it was, and how it existed. Who was going to challenge something that engrained in the world? If your money was on a monk with a faith crisis who loved to drink beer and translate the Bible and wasn't sure if God would ever love him, well...the jackpot is yours.

Now, Luther didn't exactly go into this whole thing expecting to change the world and create a whole new church. He just wanted to suggest some edits, some changes. He wanted to hold the mirror up to what the church had gotten comfortable with and dare to ask what Jesus would think of those actions, but the church responded in full Cersei Lannister, "When you play the game of thrones, you either win or you die, and there is no middle ground." The church was uninterested in introspection, in daring to ask themselves where they had gone wrong, in wondering if they might do something different to better align with Jesus' calling to justice, grace, and love for neighbor. And so Luther...went full Luther.

And we know the story, right? 95 things the church could rethink, do different, be better about nailed to the door of the church on the morning of October 31, 1517, thus beginning an all out war between Luther and the powers that be. What followed were trials and book burnings and professions of "Here I stand." There were nuns hidden in fish barrels, time spent in house arrest protected by a Duke, and the promise that, in fact, our salvation wasn't up to us, but solely up to God, a mission accomplished once and for all by Christ's death on the cross, but in the midst of it all, a deep and abiding call to service, to the gospel, to recognizing that because we are free from the bondage of death and the threat of damnation, we were also

free to take the gospel seriously, to be about the real work of Christ, and go out and serve our neighbor. Luther was uninterested in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would come to term “cheap grace,” a grace that said, I am saved and thus I can get away with anything I want to, the world is my oyster, go me and my salvation. Luther was solely interested in a grace that said, my word, I am so blessed and so forgiven and so loved that I must go out and use that for the sake of my neighbor, whom Jesus said was everyone. Now of course Luther gave his own really poor interpretations of neighbor when it came to the Anabaptists and our Jewish siblings and we are still reckoning with that, but the heart of his point was accurate. We are free, free from fear and free to serve and love fully.

That is our legacy, our foundation, and who we have always proclaimed to be, but Luther would be highly discontented if the church he begrudgingly allowed to take his name began to be the church that rested on its laurels, became comfortable with the status quo, and did not challenge where they saw things going awry. The world we live in is not so different from the one Luther emerged from, a church and a government knit so closely together that it was hard to distinguish one from the other despite best laid plans, books burned or banned when they said something uncomfortable, the poor and oppressed being ignored and taken advantage

of, all the while the church says the right things but fails to always do the right thing, more than one segment of society pushed out of the way and labeled as other because they weren't part of the in crowd, and all the while the church is doing whatever it can to survive, even if that sometimes means sacrificing the gospel.

It's possible that we, as a community, as individuals, as the church writ large, have come to a point that the question is no longer what do we want to be when we grow up, but what do we want our legacy to be, what do we want to say we stood for once we grew into who we wanted to be. Do we want to be known for maintaining the status quo, not rocking the boat when things get hard, for striving for institutional survival even if it means sometimes sacrificing the call of the gospel? Or do we want to be known for doing the hard work of justice when it is called for? Do we want to be known for doing whatever we can to live into the call of the gospel even when its daunting, isolating, and relentless? One of those roads is easy and one is immensely difficult, but only one of those roads is the one we're actually called to follow.

Luther said once that the church should always be reforming, that it should never get content that the work is finished. We live in a world that is begging the church to be about the work of reformation, to shake off the

cobwebs of what once was and dare to ask what can be now. We cannot be a church that lives in isolation from the world around us, but must confront the problems that are in our own neighborhoods, our own lives, our own institutions and then dare to try and do something about them, rather than just shrug and say, well, it's always been this way, there's not much we can do here that hasn't been done or tried before.

The church is looking into a future that for sure feels uncertain, where we aren't necessarily sure what it will look like to be "the church," but it is a future that needs what we stand for—grace, love, seeing our neighbor as they are, daring to ask the hard questions of what can we do differently. Luther said our foundations were faith alone, Christ alone, and scripture alone. Scripture tells us that Christ calls us to radical love for our neighbor, born out of the radical love God has for us, and that is what we profess to have faith in, so how are we going to live that out? How are we going to continue to build on that foundation as we look ahead to the next ten years, the next 500? May we dare to be Reformation people, a Reformation church that does not ever think the work is done, but knows that the gospel is ever-calling us forward to serve better and love more. People of God, we have grown up, we have laid the foundations, we know who we are, but may we ask ourselves faithfully and honestly what we want to build? **AMEN!!!**