

**SERMON PREACHED BY BISHOP MARK S. HANSON**  
*President, Lutheran World Federation*  
*Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*  
**Castle Church, Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Germany -- September 21, 2008**  
Preaching Texts: Romans 14:17-19, Mark 12: 28-34

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen

It is a great joy to worship with you today.

I bring you greetings from the Lutheran World Federation and from the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Thank you for your hospitality and for the important leadership the people of Wittenberg are providing for the commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

What questions do you bring to this worship service? Are they burning questions like Martin Luther's, "What is my posture in the presence of God (*coram deo*)?" Are they questions we Lutheran Christians always should be asking: What gospel are we proclaiming? Who is the Jesus are we portraying? Is he the one who was crucified for the world's salvation? What faith are we professing?

Perhaps you are asking questions similar to those asked by the Roman Christians to whom Paul wrote, "How shall I remain faithful to Christ in the face of an empire's brutal power?" Are your questions about how we live as Christians in an increasingly multi-faith world that seems ever drawn to religious extremism on the one hand and secularism on the other? Perhaps you are questioning whether—given our consumptive living and warring madness—there even will be a future for God's creation. So often our questions reveal our greatest fears and our deepest desires.

As we begin this decade commemorating the Lutheran Reformation, it is fitting for us to ask, "How far have we come together?" As a Lutheran tradition and as a communion of faith, how far have we come? Are we stuck in the sixteenth century? Is this weekend's celebration simply our nostalgic longing for a bygone era? Some would say so. I think not.

We have covered real territory together. What began in Germany 500 years ago as a reforming movement has grown to include the 68 million Lutheran Christians in 140 member churches in 78 countries who make up the Lutheran World Federation, a communion of churches.

As you know, the fastest growing Lutheran churches are in Africa and Indonesia. Yet in other places where Lutherans once were strong, we are declining in membership and sometimes lacking a sense of vitality in ministry and mission. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which I serve as presiding bishop, continues to lose an average of 40,000 baptized members a year. Our fastest growing group of congregations are those where fewer than 50 people are at worship on Sunday.

Whatever our context, let this be a time when, as people shaped by the Reformation, we recommit ourselves to be an evangelizing people engaged in God's mission for the life of the world. One of the opportunities we are given in this coming decade is to look back over the

past 500 years. In so doing, we will see that as Lutherans we have covered real territory together. We have lived real history together. We have made history.

But now, looking at that history, what can we say about the path we've taken together as Lutheran Christians in almost five centuries? Forget about any pretense that it's been a sinless, perfect march; we all know much has happened that needs forgiveness from God, other believers, and the human family. That we are simultaneously saint and sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*) is not just a doctrine. It is descriptive of our lives and legacy.

This weekend begins what I hope will be a thoughtful global conversation as we together contemplate another question, "Where have we arrived as a human community 500 years after Luther arrived in Wittenberg?" Has there been any justification for five centuries of perseverance in distinguishing ourselves as a church, as a confession? any good effect that lives up to the name "evangelical?"

Obviously we are more technologically advanced (although our children will tell you their father is not keeping up!). Some live in greater abundance with more material comfort. There have been great advances in health care, food production, and scientific discoveries from DNA to distant galaxies. Even despite the disparities of wealth, some have taken these developments as signs of "progress."

"The kingdom of God is not food and drink," Paul wrote to Roman Christians. Where have we arrived? As troubling as the disparities of wealth, affluence, and material comfort are, even more troubling is the corresponding reality of where we have arrived spiritually. The reality is that every supposed advance in technology, in scientific understanding, in travel, and in communication has been subverted to increasing exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants and to an ever increasing storm of violence and devastation.

The last 100 years of human history have witnessed murderous violence whose depth of blind hatred has been matched only by the scale of its destructive power. And it continues to this day. Too often the nation in which I am a citizen has been complicit in violence by silence or by acts of aggression. By these measures, it is more than sobering to ask "where have we arrived?" It is at once both heart-breaking and terrifying to recognize where we are.

And yet, do you know where you are? What you see beneath the veneer of technological marvel and cultural achievement may appear to be god-forsaken, a vast wasteland of empty pursuits, or, even worse, a persistent evil that will not release you. If that is what you see, then in all likelihood your vision is acute. But what about your hearing and your ears, the organ of faith?

"You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). Did you hear that word Jesus spoke? Did you hear when and where it was spoken: two millennia ago to a member of a defeated, occupied nation, far from the center of power, a minor local official, whose name is not in the historical record? Did you hear it now across the centuries, spoken in your hearing here, today?

"You are not far from the kingdom of God." Who could say such a thing? Oh, yes, any one could mouth the words. But this was Jesus speaking. The One who began his public ministry announcing, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14-15). The kingdom of God was happening right before

their eyes when Jesus embraced the outcast and befriended the sinner. It was happening in their very midst when in expectation and hope the sick came to Jesus, or their friends brought them, even tearing open a roof: lives were restored, opened up, liberated. Oh, my friends, the reign of God suddenly was showing up all over the place— in words of forgiveness, in the promises given with bread and wine, in a new covenant of mercy offered to those deemed to be of no worth.

“You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Was Jesus simply giving words of encouragement to the scribe and to us so that by our continued efforts, by our keeping the law, we will soon achieve the kingdom of God? Or was Jesus speaking words of promise that the kingdom of God will come to us through Jesus’ death and resurrection, that it will be received a gift of God’s grace through faith?

The reign of God on the cross— that place that seems most god-forsaken, the place created by human hatred and rejection, by fear and cynicism— there, on the cross, Jesus’ faithfulness to God’s promised love was lifted up publicly for all to see. It is why Jesus came: to bring the enduring, steadfast love of God to the most god-forsaken place. Jesus came to be obedient to death, even death on a cross. Behold the Lamb of God. The kingdom of God is at hand.

“You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Those words continue to be true for you because God’s kingdom has called out servants of the Word. The city of Wittenberg and all who have carried the name “Lutheran” can rightfully give thanks to God that this man Martin, having experienced the “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17), came to so many places— the pulpits of Germany and the pages of history— with the comforting message of life in Jesus Christ on his lips.

By God’s grace, through that Word, the Holy Spirit continues to call you to faith and sets you free to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. In Christ you are set free to love your neighbor as yourself. As Luther taught us, Christ’s love has two dimensions, “The love Christ bears toward us, and the love we owe our neighbor.”<sup>1</sup> He also said, “Indeed, by faith we become gods, and partakers of the divine nature... but through love we become equal to the poorest... servants of all. By faith we receive blessings from above, from God; through love we give them out below to our neighbor.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, one of the most important questions for us to ask today is, “What is my posture before my neighbor? my Muslim neighbor, my Jewish neighbor, before neighbors shamed for their poverty or despised for their prosperity?” Just as the Word once attracted a nameless scribe and called a servant named Martin, so it continues to call us to “what makes for peace and mutual upbringing” (Romans 14:19).

A most fitting commemoration of the Lutheran Reformation will be the daily renewal of our baptismal calling to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. In so doing you will be bearing witness to God’s promised future. You will be announcing, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity. Ephesians 3:13-21.” In *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. John N. Lenker, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 8:279.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany. Matthew 8:1-13.” In *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, 2:73-74.