

Sermon for Reformation Sunday 2019

– Honoring the Ministry of Pr. Jim DeLange

by Pr. Bea Chun
Sunday, October 27, 2019
St. Francis Lutheran Church



You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

John 8:32

Grace to you and peace from the one who is, and the one who was, and the one who is to come.

You will know the truth and the truth will set you free, Jesus said. We read that in today's gospel.

You will know the truth and the truth will set you free. But first, you get in trouble. Or you start trouble. Or both.

It seems that knowing the truth and getting in trouble go hand in hand, because knowing the truth usually demands telling the truth. And not everybody is always ready to hear it. And not everybody agrees on what is true, and not everybody arrives at the same truth or arrives at the truth at the same time.

Look again at today's gospel reading. As soon as Jesus makes his statement about truth, an argument breaks out among his listeners. So knowing the truth and then speaking the truth can be a lonely business and even a dangerous one. And yet, in the end, there is liberation. There is the setting free, which is the wonderful gift of truth. And therefore we owe a great debt to all those who have bravely embraced and proclaimed the truth, often at great cost to themselves.

And so it is good that we have days like today, Reformation Sunday, when we give thanks for prophet and reformers and renewers of the Church. But the actual Reformation Day, the official commemoration of the Reformation, is not today, it is this coming Thursday, October 31st . . . the day when all over America people are celebrating Halloween.

People, especially young people and students in my confirmation classes, have always been surprised by this fact. You mean Reformation Day falls on Halloween? Yes, of course, and that was the point! That's why Martin Luther picked that day. If you think that Halloween is a big deal now, Halloween in the time of Martin Luther was a very big event, much bigger

than it is today. It was one of the most important days of the year, except that it was celebrated in the church with a High Mass and not in the streets and homes as we do now. It was a religious festival, not a time for parties, candies, and costumes.

In the time of Martin Luther Halloween was more like Christmas Eve. It was, in fact, an evening service. That's where the "een" of Halloween comes from. "een" is short for evening. It was the evening before All Saints Day, which was then called All Hallows; and that word "Hallow" we know from a famous prayer, right? The prayer of Jesus, where it says: *Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

So, it was the evening of All Hallows, and according to tradition, Martin Luther picked this moment to grab the attention of his audience by posting 95 theses on the Church Door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The 95 theses were points for an academic discussion. They were written in Latin, which was the language for academic teaching and learning in the time of Martin Luther.

But pretty soon, surprise, surprise, there were translations available. They showed up in the form of flyers and leaflets, thanks to a newly invented technology called the printing press, and before long, these flyers and leaflets were everywhere: in Leipzig, Nuremberg, in Basel and even in the Netherlands. In short, the 95 theses "went viral" as we would say today.

How did this happen? How did the 95 theses go viral? Perhaps the friends and followers of Martin Luther were so inspired by his words that they immediately started to copy and distribute the leaflets. But I think it is much more likely that Martin Luther himself had planned a mass distribution all along. After all, he had also sent the theses to the Archbishop of Mainz, along with a letter dated October 31, 1517. This tells me that he had a plan all along, a plan that involved more than just the posting of the theses on the door in Wittenberg.

For sure, Martin Luther was a brilliant theologian, but he was also a strategic thinker. He did not just think holy thoughts in an ivory tower detached from the world--no, he engaged with the world. He purposefully used all available media and the latest technology of his time to promote his ideas, to build networks, to create momentum, and to start a movement. He did not leave things to chance.

And in this way, Pastor DeLange, you remind me a lot of Martin Luther. You have this same gift, this same talent for planning and strategizing. Like Martin Luther you saw a need for reform in the church, and you also figured out the necessary steps forward: you connected people with people, built networks, created momentum, and helped start a movement. You also did not leave things to chance.

I still remember the first day I met you. It was 29 years ago, and now I have to tell a little story, so bear with me:

The year was 1990 and at that time I lived in Houston, Texas. One day my best friend from Germany came to visit. We had been roommates in Germany in the 80's, back when we were both enrolled in the Theology Department of the University of Hamburg.

Back then we were both very busy throughout the day. We had seminars and

assignments, and people to see and places to go; but we always took time to have breakfast together, and our breakfasts often lasted half a morning. They involved long conversations and deep theological discussions. My friend had a burning question to which he returned again and again: and the question was this: *How can I be gay and still become a pastor without having to hide in the closet?* That should have been my burning question as well, but back then I had not woken up to this realization yet.

And so, here he was visiting me in Houston and he said: We have to go on a road trip; we have to go to California. And so we drove all the way from Texas to Los Angeles and then to San Francisco.

As an aid in our travel we used the Rand McNally Road Atlas. Do you know this atlas, the Rand McNally Road Atlas? I loved this Road Atlas, it was fantastic. The only problem was that my friend looked at this atlas with eyes that were used to German maps. In a German map two cities that look like they are close together generally tend to be close together. Hamburg and Bremen, for example, are an hour and a half apart. Frankfurt and Heidelberg are just one hour apart. In Germany everything is nearby. From my hometown it is just two hours to the French border, three hours to the Swiss border, four hours to the Austrian border. These were the distances my friend was used to so, naturally, this was the way he looked at the Rand McNally Road Atlas.

Look, he said, there is a ghost town not too far from here. We should go see it; it is just a little detour. Well, these little detours were never little. It generally took eight to ten hours to get to all those places that looked like they were supposedly close by. Also, we learned to be careful with camp grounds that had names like Whispering Pines. Generally they had no pines at all and no one there ever whispered.

And so, with these and many other adventures we eventually arrived in San Francisco. There had been an earthquake the year before and many places were still broken. There were entire freeway sections along the Embarcadero that were all broken down.

Now, my friend said, now we have to go to this church called St Francis Church. He had read about St. Francis in Germany, and it interested him very much because of his burning question. We just showed up, without an appointment, and there you were, Pastor DeLange, and you took time to meet with us. You also served us coffee in special cups that said: Lutherans Concerned with a little pink fish. And you admonished us to use coasters for our cups and not put the cups directly on the wooden table.

After that, we spent some time in the Castro, naturally, and we visited many interesting sites in San Francisco, and then we drove back to Texas.

29 years have gone by since that first encounter, and many things happened in those 29 years. Ask me about it later. And never, ever would I have guessed that one day I would be the pastor here at St. Francis! To me this is an incredible gift, an act of sheer grace, and there are days when I still can't quite believe it; which makes me a happy Christian, and a fortunate a pastor, but clearly not a very well equipped reformer.

Because a reformer does not leave such things to chance. A reformer takes matters into his or her hand. A reformer makes things happen, and sets things in motion, and plans

and strategizes the way Martin Luther did 500 years ago . . . and the way you did, Pastor DeLange, 30 years ago.

Now, where does that leave the rest of us--ordinary pastors and lay leaders, people in the pews--who long for reform, but don't have the gift of strategy? Luckily for us, the reformers gave us more than just a reform, they also gave us a road map.

When Martin Luther and the reformers started the Reform in Wittenberg, and when you, Pastor DeLange, and the other visionaries started Lutheran Gay and Lesbian Ministries, you gave the church two important gifts.

The first gift was the reform itself--the thing that needed to be fixed--the reformation of the church in the 16th century and the full inclusion of queer people in the 21st century.

The second gift was the gift of a road map: You left a map of the steps you took: the rounds and rounds of conversations; the networking; the letter writing; the formation of teams and organizations; the setting of goals; the fundraising; the advocacy.

All of these together make a great road map. In a way, you gave the church its very own Rand McNally Road Atlas for strategic planning.

And in this way, pastors and lay leaders like me who love the church and long for reform but don't quite have the knack of strategizing, we can use your maps and figure out a way forward!

Oh That I Had a Thousand Voices. You said that this is one of your favorite hymns Pastor DeLange. It is a song, but it is also a prayer and a plea. Oh that I had a thousand voices!

Pastor DeLange, this prayer has been answered. Your voice has become a thousand voices, even more than a thousand. What you and the other visionaries have begun has been multiplied by hundreds of congregations and thousands of believers.

And now, through the daily acts of justice and courage, God is praised a thousand times each day by the many people whose lives have been touched and changed and are still changing thanks to your ministry, your vision, your dedication, your tireless engagement, and your faith in God.

Thank you, Pastor DeLange, for your love of the truth, and the love of the church. Thank you for all you have done for St. Francis, for the City of San Francisco, for the Lutheran Church in America, and even for people in Germany and South Africa.

Thanks be to God, and thanks be to you!

Amen