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Keynote Address
Northeastern Iowa Synod Assembly, 13 June 2015

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation in Germany, dated by Martin Luther's posting of his 95 Theses against indulgences on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. But this was no isolated action. Luther's scripture-guided desire to reform the church was not the first attempt in Christian history to reform the church, and the reform that Luther's action sparked unfolded over many years. Luther continued to work tirelessly for reform and renewal alongside colleagues in the university, the church, and the community.

This year in the Northeastern Iowa Synod of the ELCA we begin a 6 year emphasis leading up to and continuing beyond the year 2017. This year we recognize the bold leadership and witness of 15th century Czech reformer Jan Hus. Next year we celebrate the courageous service of 13th century Hungarian princess St. Elizabeth. In 2017 we celebrate Martin Luther's rediscovery of the power of the Gospel. In 2018 we will focus on the educational ministry of the Reformation, with attention to Luther's colleague at the university of Wittenberg, Philip Melancthon. In 2019 we will celebrate the gifts of Katharina von Bora, the former nun who became Luther's wife, as well as the theme of faith and family life. Finally in 2020 we will lift up Johannes Bugenhagen, the parish pastor of the Reformation, who implemented Luther's reforming ideas in the congregation (and who also introduced the reformation to Denmark). We lift up these women and men from the past not to enshrine them on pedestals or in museums but to honor them for their faith and to be inspired by them in our own faith and life.

So who is this Jan (or John) Hus? And why should we care?

Jan Hus was a church reformer who lived in the Kingdom of Bohemia, which was part of the Holy Roman Empire. There's much that we don't know about Jan Hus. His birthdate, for instance. Some scholars say 1371, but others say 1369 or 1370 or 1372. We don't even know his family name. He came from the village of Husinec, and so the label Hus attached itself to him when we left home.

He came from a peasant family, and nothing much is known of his life before he went off to school in Prague. He did say that his initial motive in choosing to enter the ministry was to attain social respect and a higher standard of living, but that soon changed. He earned a bachelor's degree (1393) and then a master's degree (1396), and then began to teach at the university of Prague. Hus was ordained a priest around 1401. In the spring of 1402 Hus was appointed preacher at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, which had been founded about a decade earlier (1391) by two leading citizens of Prague for the purpose of vernacular preaching -- preaching in Czech, the language of the common people, rather than in Latin. And it's important to note that while Bethlehem Chapel was called a "chapel," it seated around 3000 people -- and when Hus's

preaching became known, Bethlehem Chapel was filled. He continued to teach and to write, but from this point on his main identity was as preacher.

And, sisters and brothers in Christ, Hus was a preacher who was not afraid to speak his mind. He spoke out against the sale of indulgences, which offered the promise of forgiveness for a monetary price. He spoke out against the sale of leadership positions in the church – even though his own bishop had purchased that position. He spoke out against the immorality of other church leaders – and he named names! – which, as you can imagine, created quite a few enemies. He insisted that the Scriptures were the highest authority in the church. Church members and church leaders alike needed to be held accountable to the Scriptures, and even popes could make mistakes. People flocked to hear him.

Later in his ministry he supported the practice of offering both bread and wine to the congregation for communion. This was a time when the official teaching of the church was that lay people could only receive the bread, and only priests could also receive the sacramental wine.

Because of his emphasis on the Scriptures, his critique of indulgences, and his support for communion offered in both bread and wine, Hus is often considered one of the forerunners of the Reformation sparked by Martin Luther. At the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, where Luther would post his 95 Theses against indulgences a century after Hus' death, there is a series of windows depicting other early reformers, and Jan Hus is among them. Similarly, the Reformation Monument in Worms, Germany, where Luther made his famous "Here I stand" speech depicts Luther in the center. The figures standing at the corners around Luther are his contemporaries: scholars Johannes Reuchlin and Philip Melancthon, princes Frederick the Wise and Philip of Hesse. Seated around him, at his feet, are four reformers who preceded Luther, each of whom was declared a heretic, and among these is Jan Hus.

Because the name "Hus" is the Czech word for "goose," it has become common to describe Hus as the goose who was followed later by a swan, Luther. But we do a disservice to Hus and his followers if we treat him primarily as an earlier, unsuccessful Luther (Luther's opening act, if you will). He was a committed reformer in his own right in his own time and place -- deeply grounded in the Scriptures, deeply concerned for the care of the Christian community he served, and willing to die for his beliefs (which he did).

"Seek the truth. Listen to the truth. Teach the truth. Love the truth. Abide by the truth. And defend the truth unto death." This is Jan Hus' advice to those who would follow Christ, and it is advice that he himself followed. Truth, for Hus, was not so much an intellectual concept as a commitment to the person of Jesus Christ.

When preaching in independent chapels like Bethlehem Chapel in Prague was prohibited, he continued to preach; and the people continued to come and listen. When his disobedience led to excommunication, he continued to preach; and the people continued to come and listen. Then the city of Prague was put under interdict. Excommunication was the church's punishment for an individual. Interdict was the church's punishment for an entire region. When a community was placed under interdict, priests were ordered to withhold all religious services: no regular worship, no preaching, no sacraments, no marriages, baptisms, or funerals. The point, of course,

was to put pressure on the local population so that they would abandon Hus. Out of pastoral concern for the people of Prague, Hus went into exile for several years so that the people would not be deprived of the sacraments. But he continued to preach in other places, and he wrote pastoral letters back to his beloved citizens of Prague.

Hus was censored by church authorities because they considered him to be a heretic, a teacher of false doctrine. Hus denied being a heretic – but his commitment to the truth – to Jesus as the truth – was so strong that he argued against burning the books of heretics. They should be read, not burnt, he said, because it was important to be challenged by different ideas. There was nothing to fear from ideas, Hus believed; for the truth will always prevail. The real heretics, he said, were those who banned open discussion.

In 1414, after two years in exile, Hus was called to the Council of Constance, to respond to charges that he was a heretic. Hus came to Constance, expecting to be given an opportunity to defend his views. Instead he was imprisoned (despite have had his safety guaranteed by the Holy Roman Emperor). He was interrogated repeatedly, asked to deny heresies that he said he had never taught in the first place. He was accused of being a follower of the English reformer John Wycliffe, whose writings Hus had read and even translated into Czech, but whom the church had rejected as a heretic. Hus asked to be shown from the Scriptures where he was in error, but the Council simply insisted that he obey their authority. Hus refused to do so, not only because of his personal commitment to the truth but because he thought that giving in would give a bad witness to the people who had welcomed his preaching.

Paintings depict Hus standing boldly testifying before the Council of Constance (just as artists will depict Martin Luther a century later boldly testifying before the Diet of Worms). But there's so much that this one dramatic scene can't capture. We don't see the months in prison awaiting his fate, the months in which we wrote dozens of letters - letters of encouragement to his friends and supporters, letters of advice to those working for reform, letters asking the authorities to do their duty, and beautiful pastoral letters to the people of Prague. He even dedicated some of his prison writings to his jailers (including a tract on love as the basis of Christian life). Even while he anticipated his own martyrdom, Hus continued to be preacher and pastor to others.

On July 6, 1415, the Council of Constance condemned Hus, saying that “John Hus seduced the Christian people, especially in the kingdom of Bohemia, in his public sermons and in his writings; and that he was not a true preacher of Christ's gospel to the same Christian people” and that “He has greatly scandalised Christ's faithful by *his obstinacy since, bypassing the church's intermediaries, he has made appeal directly to our lord Jesus Christ, as to the supreme judge.*”

Did you catch that? He was condemned in part for his stubbornness, and the proof of his stubbornness was that instead of accepting the authority of the church leaders, he turned directly to Christ. If that's heresy, may we all be such heretics.

In a letter written from prison two weeks before his death, Hus wrote this prayer:
“O most kind Christ, draw us weaklings after Thyself, for unless Thou draw us, we cannot follow Thee! Give us a courageous spirit that it may be ready; and if the flesh is weak, may Thy grace go before For without Thee we can do nothing, and particularly to go to a cruel death

for Thy sake. Give us a valiant spirit, a fearless heart, the right faith, a firm hope, and perfect love, that we may offer our lives for Thy sake with the greatest patience and joy. Amen.”

Hus faced his death as he had lived his life, trusting in God’s grace through Jesus Christ.

It’s reported that when Hus was stripped of his priestly robes before he was led to the stake for burning, he wept. He wept not for his own loss of status or even for his imminent loss of life, but for the loss of the ability to serve as a pastor to his people. When he was stripped of the symbols of his pastoral office, he wept. But when he was led to the stake, and the wood piled around him was set on fire, he died singing – singing prayers from the liturgy.

The Greek word “martyr” literally means witness. Jan Hus was a witness to Jesus Christ in life and in death. And while it’s unlikely that any of us will be called to die a martyr’s death, in truth we are all called to live a martyr’s life.

My prayer for the Northeastern Iowa Synod is that we are not just celebrating renewal but actively engaged in renewal. As a synod, as congregations, as church, this is not a solo task. We are called together as one body of Christ. We are baptized into the communion of saints, with all faithful Christians throughout history and those who are yet to come. The world needs our bold leadership. And none of us should say, “I’m not bold” or “I’m not a leader.” The bold leadership to which we are called is Christian life and witness that is emboldened by the Spirit of the living God.

Jan Hus, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, Katie von Bora Luther, Johannes Bugenhagen – and a mirror for you.

I invite you to stand and join together in singing – boldly – a hymn written by Danish pastor Nikolai Grundtvig. The tune is familiar. Grundtvig wrote these words to be a fifth stanza of Martin Luther’s great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” to be sung at the end of the worship service, as a way of claiming the call to reformation and renewal as our own.

“God’s word is our great heritage
and shall be ours forever;
to spread its light from age to age
shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way;
in death it is our stay.
Lord, grant while time shall last
your church may hold it fast
throughout all generations.”

Amen.