

ASSEMBLY SERMON

2017

We are in our third year of our six-year emphasis of Celebrating Renewal. We began with Jan Hus and how leadership is key to renewal. Last year was St. Elizabeth and how her gift of service renewed the church. Next year we will remember Philip Melanchthon and the role of education in renewing the church; followed by Katie Luther and how the renewal of the church begins in our home life. We will conclude this emphasis with Johannes Bugenhagen — a parish pastor recognizing that without him and others like him the Reformation could easily have been simply an academic debate in the university.

This year is the 500th anniversary of the posting of the 95 Theses. We celebrate the Gospel itself focusing on the witness of Martin Luther.

There can be lively debate about the Gospel. It seems so simple yet humans try to make it hard. Pastors have been asked to preach “more about hell” or, “Tell me how to live a moral life.” This is not the Gospel.

Here is how Dr. Timothy Wengert, church historian who has retired from the Lutheran School of Theology in Philadelphia, describes the Gospel:

Wengert Video

Or, as Martin Luther writes in his meaning to the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed:

“I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel....”

I believe that I cannot believe—but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel.

“Someone asked Martin Luther what we contribute to salvation, and he said, ‘Sin and resistance.’” (Michael Horton)

Pure, unconditional grace. God's decision to become human, live on earth, be crucified, and then raised to new life.

For you and for the sake of the world.

That Good News is proclaimed in both word and deed.

("Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." This is a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. And if he didn't say it, I bet he wishes he had.

Our daughter, Krista, started her career as a kindergarten teacher in a charter school in Denver, the mile high city not the mile wide city in Iowa, Colorado. There are many stories...this is a line...this is the first row... that probably all kindergarten teachers face. But there were other challenges in her context.

She would start the year with 20 students but by Christmas there were a different 20 students. Poverty and migrant families created great instability in the lives of these children. Only one student in the school read at grade level. Her context was one of limited opportunity.

It was also true that it was in kindergarten that students were first tested for various learning disabilities or special needs.

One of her students turned out to have a variety of diagnoses. I don't know what they all were. I do know that every 15-30 minutes she would have to curl him up in a little ball and hold him or else he could not function. He could not feel his body sitting in a chair. He would throw his body against the wall just so he could feel his body.

This is the young man going to prom. [picture]

Loving teachers, doctors and adoptive parents have brought him to a new day.

From brokenness to healing. Dare I say, from death to Resurrection? The Gospel.

The Gospel shows up sometimes in pretty ordinary places. Most all of our congregations have confirmation classes. As the Augsburg Fortress materials have been developed in new ways to connect with the current generation, these classes are much more exciting and engaging than the three-hour Saturday morning lecture by the pastor completed by

reciting your memory work in front of the congregation that I knew as a confirmand. It is good stuff that communicates the unconditional love and grace of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is proclaimed in conversations and stories of the faith shared in class. I've asked Pastor Mark Anderson, Assistant to the Bishop, to share an account when he taught confirmation recently.

Mark's Story

(Luther Cover slide)

Professor, Martin Luther.

A kindergarten teacher.

A confirmation class.

Only Jesus. The Gospel.

For you. For the sake of the world.

Amen.