



Sunday, October 27, 2024
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 10:46-52
“By Schisms Rent Asunder”
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

To most of us, “The Church’s One Foundation” is as familiar as – what shall we say? – pumpkin pie, or your dog’s cute face, or the back of your hand. “The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.” Sing that line with me:

We know the tune, but how deeply have we pondered this text is telling us? Because these are words we need now, more than ever.

Some background will help.

The hymn was written in 1866 by Samuel J. Stone, 1839-1900, a young Anglican priest in Oxford, England and an accomplished poet. At that time he was deeply affected by a controversy consuming the Anglican church concerning the origin of the first five books of the Old Testament. Remember that Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species” had been published just seven years earlier, and some of the same principles were at play. The issue was: Did God dictate Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy directly to Moses, as traditionalists believed? Or could modern methods of source-critical analysis already being used widely in Germany, involving the study of ancient manuscripts and their transmission, reveal a deeper understanding of why and how these texts came together as they did?

The controversy was centered in South Africa, where two prominent bishops were loudly advocating the opposing points of view. So heated was the climate that the conservative bishop tried to have the progressive bishop excommunicated. In the end, the move toward scholarship prevailed. The effect of all this was to shift the tectonic plates of biblical understanding into a deeper awareness of how God’s inspired word was transmitted down through the ages.

Samuel Stone wrote “The Church’s One Foundation” to his articulate his distress over the rift and to convey an urgent plea for unity, especially as expressed in the third article of the Apostles’ Creed – “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.” The hymn is a favorite choice for Reformation Sunday, because of course Martin Luther was also an advocate for the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

As we know, Luther did not set out to start a new denomination; he disliked the term “Lutherans” for those who followed him, preferring they simply call themselves “Christians.” His first order of business was to reform a long list of grossly unbiblical practices the Roman Catholic Church was perpetrating on its own people. In concise and brilliant language, Luther demonstrated in 95 theses how the Roman Catholic Church had been taking terrible advantage of its people solely to enrich its own treasury. And then there was his epiphany: We are saved not by what we do, but by faith alone, through God’s grace.

No figure since Jesus Christ has changed the course of history more resoundingly than Luther did. Most transformational was the publication in 1534 of Luther's own translation of the Bible from Latin into German, the language of the people. The first English translation was published the next year and many more after that. The recent innovation of the printing press allowed the Bible to find its way into the hands of the people. This broke the Church's domination over their lives for purposes of power and profit.

Now people could see what the Bible did say, and which claims of the Church were unbiblical. One church, one people, one book, just as in Samuel Stone's first two stanzas – one foundation, one Lord, one faith, one birth.

But it is Stone's Stanza 3 that has the potential to speak to us most powerfully at this moment. Are we the people not being rent asunder by schisms and distressed by heresies? Even though we know from Paul we are not of the world, we are still in the world, so that false doctrine weighs on us heavily, especially when the Christian faith is being twisted into a weapon of hate to exclude and oppress.

All around us, and more every day, we see that the ways of hate promoted, not the ways of love. Neither we at Grace, nor the church at large, can withstand being rent asunder by division that corrodes our efforts to move forward. Whatever temptations are in your heart to engage in criticism and dispute must be lifted to God in prayer, so that our petitions can be transformed by God's love. In this way we will rediscover that we are, in fact, a people whose goal is to work together to serve our neighbor.

Luther understood this purpose better than anyone. In July 1520, Pope Leo X catalogued 41 doctrinal errors he judged Luther to be making and threatened him with excommunication. Luther's response was the little book "On the Freedom of a Christian" in which he explains the joy of the Christian life. Luther makes the point that God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbor does. Since Jesus has done everything we need for salvation, he said, we can focus our works and efforts on serving our neighbor. He concludes, "I will, therefore, give myself as Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me."

Theologian Joseph Sittler from the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Chicago explains further. "Our neighbors, in the biblical sense, are those persons who live in God's creation with us in the solidarity of our life together on earth. In the broad context of human solidarity the exercise of love is realized in transaffectional justice. Real love grasps the hand that need holds out."

Although the Lutheran Church has been divided for centuries, we are now rent asunder into three branches that are growing farther apart with time. Even though we all share the same set of Confessions, it is a modern tragedy that neither the ELCA nor the Missouri Synod nor the Wisconsin Synod is in doctrinal fellowship with one another.

The Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, of which I am currently president, is one of only two pan-Lutheran organizations – the other being Lutheran World Federation. At ALCM conferences we remember this tragedy of schism when our Missouri and Wisconsin brothers

and sisters must refuse communion offered by ELCA presiders -- or risk censure. Last summer a treasured colleague from the Missouri Synod bravely came up to accept the sacrament from me at our conference. Knowing what was at risk, I had to work hard to hold back tears.

As Christians we must practice the ways of love and we must start here at Grace Lutheran Church. We can no longer abide dissension and disagreement. For goodness' sake, let's all get together on the same page.

Since we began with the Anglicans, let's listen to what the Most Rev. Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, has to say about how Christians need to embrace the way of love especially at this point in our nation's history:

As followers of Jesus, his command to love our neighbors means neighbors of every type, of every faith, not just our own. Through our baptism and in our democracy, we are called to a way of love that creates a community in which the dignity of every human being is recognized and respected, and where all can have an equal say in the governing of our civic life. The violence, intimidation and distortion of scripture associated with "Christian nationalism" does not reflect the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, and so I stand with fellow leaders in the Christian community and call for a better way.

If we can do this as a united body in Christ, the same pronouncement of healing that Bartimaeus received from Jesus will also fall on us: "Go; your faith has made you well."