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Reformation
Peace, Seattle
October 28, 2018
John 8:31-36

# PLANTING TREES VS. PLANTING BOMBS

There's a linden tree planted there by Roman Catholics and a hackberry planted by the Moravians. There's a European ash from Argentina and a whitebeam tree from the church of Suriname. Koreans contributed a flowering ash to the garden and the people of Cameroon a European birdcherry. Canadians planted a honey locust and Ethiopians a woodland hawthorn.

And when the final dozen trees are planted this week at the Luthergarten in Wittenberg, Germany, there will be 500 trees all told, from over 100 countries, growing in the ground where historic fortifications once stood.[1]

It's the culmination of a project envisioned by Lutheran World Federation leaders—that churches from every confessional tradition on every continent be invited to plant one tree in Wittenberg and another in their home country, in celebration of the 500 years of the Reformation movement.

As the first stones were laid at the official opening of the Luthergarten in 2008, Lutheran World Federation President and ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson reminded those who had gathered, that the time in which Luther lived was haunted by nightmares and fantasies about what the future would bring.[2]

There were nightmares of divine judgment and fantasies about a utopia created, ironically, out of violence. And there was a well-known story that Luther, when asked what he would do if God's final judgment were to arrive the next day, replied: 'Even if I knew that the world were to fall to pieces tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree today.'

"Although the story is likely a legend," said Bishop Hanson, "it reflects the confidence that the life lived in Jesus Christ can be lived in [a spirit of] evangelical repentance that is both joyfully attentive to life in this creation and joyously hopeful for life in the new creation."

Instead of one more statue of Luther or one more sectarian symbol marking the battle of US vs. THEM, the Luthergarten is an interactive, living monument—a sign pointing to the solidarity, connectedness, and reconciliation toward which the worldwide ecumenical movement has been striving.

"Even if I knew that the world were to fall to pieces tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree today."

**The attitude and action surrounding the Luthergarten is something our world sorely needs right now**—particularly after a week which saw the news cycle dominated **first** by the story of a man who MAILED BOMBS to public figures he counted as political enemies,[3] and **then** by the massacre yesterday morning of 11 Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.[4]

[1] You can find the full list of trees and faith communities here: http://luthergarten.de/welcome.html
[2] Visit the Luthergarten Website for more about Luthergarten and for Bishop Hanson's full remarks: http://www.luthergarten.de/english-vision-background.html Some scholars believe this Luther quote originated in the German Confessing Church, which used it to inspire hope and perseverance during its opposition to the Nazi dictatorship. See Scott H. Hendrix. *Martin Luther: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford U. Press, 2010. https://books.google.com/books?id=yqI7-k3ssB4C&pg=PT126&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false
[3] The Seattle Times, Saturday, 10-27-2018 https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/investigators-search-for-person-who-sent-mail-bombs-motive/
[4] The Washington Post, Saturday, 10-27-2018 https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/27/pittsburgh-police-responding-active-shooting-squirrel-hill-area/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cccf25a6c2ee

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**How we speak to and about one another matters.** When leaders legitimize the kind of vitriolic rhetoric that was once confined to "the paranoid extremes of society," their words "act like sparks to the gasoline of disturbed minds. These words can kill."[5]

We who identify as Lutheran Christians should be particularly aware of this reality, for the tragic truth is Luther spewed out his own vitriol against the Jewish community in a now infamous treatise written three years before his death.[6]

Luther's attack on Jewish people has reverberated throughout Europe during the 500 years since. And the prevailing view among historians is that his rhetoric contributed significantly to the development of anti-semitism in Germany, and in the 1930s and 1940s provided an ideal foundation for the Nazi Party's attacks on Jews.[7]

When it came to GRACE, Luther got it right; when it came to JEWISH PEOPLE, he got it all wrong.

**It's a hard lesson**—that the worst thing we can say about other human beings can take on a life of its own, leading to consequences far beyond what we ever imagined.

**In his book, The Jesus Way, pastor and teacher Eugene Peterson writes:**

> "I am interested in the ways Jesus leads because they are necessarily the ways by which I follow. I cannot follow Jesus any which way I like. My following must be consonant with his leading. The way Jesus leads and the way that I follow Jesus are symbiotic. And this symbiosis is not treated with sufficient seriousness and depth in the Christian community of North America." [8]

"The Christian life is hard work," says Peter Marty. "Living a life aligned with Jesus is extremely difficult. We practice and practice, trying to get even a few basics right. It's mostly unglamorous work, as unglamorous as brushing teeth at the bookends of the day, or playing scales and arpeggios in endless fashion while learning the piano."[9]

African American poet and performer Maya Angelou put it this way:

> "I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business. It's not something where you think, 'Oh, I've got it done. It did it all day—hot diggity.' I'm always amazed when [people] walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast.'"[10]

Friends, our baptism plunges us into that hard work—into the moment by moment, day by day practicing of faith—and we're never done. And the means we choose in following Jesus must be consonant with the ends we're aiming toward.

Luther began the Reformation by posting 95 theses, because he believed the teachings and practices of the church—that is, its means—had become misaligned from the gospel; disconnected from the Way of Jesus.

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[5] Tom Malinowski, former director of Human Rights Watch and current congressional candidate in New Jersey. Quoted in the Washington Post article: Suspect in Pittsburgh synagogue shooting charged with 29 counts in deaths of 11 people. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/27/pittsburgh-police-responding-active-shooting-squirrel-hill-area/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cccf25a6c2ee

[6] *On the Jews and Their Lies. Luthers Werke*. 47:268–271.

[7] "The assertion that Luther's expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment have been of major and persistent influence in the centuries after the Reformation, and that there exists a continuity between Protestant anti-Judaism and modern racially oriented antisemitism, is at present wide-spread in the literature; since the Second World War it has understandably become the prevailing opinion." Johannes Wallmann, "The Reception of Luther's Writings on the Jews from the Reformation to the End of the 19th century", *Lutheran Quarterly*, n.s. 1 (Spring 1987) 1:72–97.

[8] Eugene Peterson, The Jesus Way. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. Emphasis mine.

[9] Peter Marty *Christian Century*, 10-24-2018, p. 3

[10] Quoted in ibid.

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The practice that motivated his protest was both a spiritual and an economic one: the manipulative and systemic misuse of indulgences (a kind of "get out of purgatory free" card) as a means of extorting money from the masses for Vatican building projects.

Not only did Rome's policies encourage people to believe that their actions would secure salvation for their deceased relatives, the offer of indulgences compelled people to spend money they didn't have, leaving their families without the resources necessary to provide for basic needs.

**And it wasn't only the church's practice that caused Luther alarm.** He was also alarmed, "by the growing gap between the wealthy few who benefited from an unregulated…economy and the many poor who were ignored by the wealthy or governed by unscrupulous rulers who failed to care for their most vulnerable subjects." **This is where his insight into systems of injustice shine!**

> "Where no state regulation of business exists, [said Luther] there is nothing but 'a bottomless pit of avarice and wrongdoing.'"[11] "[He] argued that it was the responsibility of the state…to propose and enforce just laws and practices that benefit the many, especially the most vulnerable."[12]

**Listen to how he connects Holy Communion to the practice of caring for the neighbor:**

> "This sacrament," says Luther, "is a sacrament of love. Love and service are given you and you again must render love and service to Christ and His needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ… all the unjust suffering of the innocent, which fills the world: You must fight, work, pray, or at least have heartfelt sympathy."[13]

**The challenge** in our day is to find that heartfelt sympathy not only for Christ's needy ones, but for those who stand on the opposite side of the deepening political divide; those we consider "the other."

**The challenge** in our time is to remain faithful to the way of Jesus by refusing to be bound by hatred, fear, and rhetoric which demean, dehumanize and divide; and he can get us there.

**"If you continue in my word," says Jesus in today's gospel, "you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."**

"FREE? BUT JESUS, WE'VE NEVER BEEN SLAVES TO ANYONE!"

**This exchange, like so many in John, takes place on many levels at once.**
It's personal, it's communal, it's theological, it's practical, it's simple, it's complicated…
it's a pull-on-your-boots-and-slog-through-the-muck journey.

> "The way of Jesus can't be imposed or mapped—it requires an active participation in following Jesus as he leads us through sometimes strange and unfamiliar territory."[14]

As murky and complicated as this world is, as divided and partisan as our nation is, we the church belong in the middle of the muddle—because that's where our Lord is—leading us from places of bondage and into a way of life that truly is life—life for us, life for our neighbor, life for the world.

"Even if I knew that the world were to fall to pieces tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree today."

**So, where will you plant your tree?**

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[11] LW 45:270, cited in Samuel Torvend, *Luther and the Hungry Poor, Gathered Fragments*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008) p. 120
[12] Ibid, p. 122.
[13] Martin Luther, *Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament*, 1519. LW 35.
[14] Eugene Peterson, op. cit., p. 18.

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**Let us pray:**
Reforming God, you love us too much to leave us where we're at. So, come to us once more and set us free. Plant your hope deep within us. Bring us out of our bondage and set our feet on your path. Teach us to speak and act and interact in ways that demonstrate that we have heard your call and are ready to follow you step by step. Amen.