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Reformation Sunday
Peace, Seattle
October 27, 2013
John 8:31-38

OUR CONTINUAL REFORMATION

In the introduction to her book Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church, Jessica Krey Duckworth tells the story of how, on family trips to the ocean as a girl, her mother would crouch in the sand for hours making elaborate castles of sand. These sand castles never failed to impress her and passers by.

Years later, on a trip to the beach with her own daughter, Jessica tried emulating her mother's creations but found herself failing miserably. In an email exchange with her mother she shared her experience and asked about the formula that made her mom's creations so successful.

The trick, said her mother, was to build close enough to the water that the moisture content of the sand would hold the structure together, while at the same time, staying far enough from the water's edge that large waves wouldn't overwhelm it while it was being created.[1]

No sand castle, of course, is a permanent structure. No matter how well built, tides and waves inevitably reclaim the turf. So why put in hours of time for something that will inevitably be washed away?

"Sandcastles are very much like life," her mother would reply.
"The joy comes from the process of living and building and not in the act of completion." (p. 2)

Duckworth calls this process of building a sand castle "an apt metaphor for a church of the cross."

- The church of the cross, sustained by the Holy Spirit, resists desires for established permanence.
- The church of the cross does not need to dread the falling sand castle because joy comes from the fluidity of newcomers and established members becoming disciples of Jesus Christ alongside one another.
- The church of the cross beckons irresistibly to be sculpted and carved, reshaped and repacked by young and old, newcomer and established member together.[2]

The very earliest name claimed by followers of Jesus was "people of the Way."
Way implies journey; and the people of God are a journeying people, engaging in fresh encounters, taking on new learning, integrating new people and new ways of viewing the world.

Church historian Phyllis Tickle, writing about the great reshaping that's taking place right now has called it THE GREAT EMERGENCE. Using a different metaphor, she says,

- Every 500 years, she says, the Christian faith holds a rummage sale and sorts through ideas that have accumulated over recent centuries. What no longer seems useful is put on the curb for recycling, while what seems essential is preserved, and thus the church becomes poised to begin a new chapter.[3]

The last great cycle was the Reformation. Now, 500 years later, says Tickle, we are in the midst of another time of rebuilding/reshaping the church, and the implications are staggering.

- Which of the traditions passed on to us will we be willing to let go of, and which will we guard zealously?

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[1] *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church.* Jessica Krey Duckworth (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), page 1.
[2] Ibid, p. 2
[3] Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.) She builds on an image proffered by Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer. Brian McLaren in turn picks up this image in his book, *A New Kind of Christianity*. (New York: Harper One, 2010) p. 11.

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- How will the lives of congregations and the forms of ministry be shaped by these forces?
- What does being Christian, or Lutheran, look like?
- How is the Spirit of God re-sculpting us in these tumultuous times?

These are questions not only for the church at large, but for every congregation to consider.

In the NOVEMBER issue of THE LUTHERAN magazine, our new Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, shares the story about an encounter a young candidate for ministry had with a waitress.
The waitress was admiring the seminarian's Luther Rose pendant and finally asked her what it was.

"It's Lutheran," replied the candidate. "Lutheran? Where's Lutheran?" asked the waitress.

Reflecting on this story, and the notion that "Lutheran" would be such an unknown quantity, Bishop Eaton writes:

- Lutheran does not coincide with Lake Wobegon.
- It's not found only in Philadelphia or Minneapolis or South Dakota, but everywhere from Maine to Hawaii, from Alaska to Puerto Rico.
- The cuisine of Lutheran is not limited to green bean casserole and Jell-O, but also tortillas, greens, fried rice and goat.
- It's not populated exclusively by the descendants of Central and Northern Europe, though there are a lot of those folks.
- It is not a place of rigid conformity nor [a place] where anything goes.
- Lutheran would never be confused with utopia. Its citizens have too realistic a view of disobedience, sin and brokenness to believe that any human habitation can claim goodness and righteousness for itself. But Lutheran is also a place of great hope.
- Lutheran is a place where the incessant human struggle for self-righteousness and self-justification is left at the border and, free of the burden of making themselves holy and acceptable to God, its where people cling to the cross of Christ as the true assurance of life.
- It's a place where people can spend their lives in service to God and neighbor.
- By God's grace Lutheran is a beautiful place.[4]

The Holy Spirit is resculpting the church. The Holy Spirit is resculpting this congregation.
If I asked you how many new people have been received into the fellowship of this congregation over the past 8 years, what would you guess? 30? 50? 80? 100?

125 persons have made Peace their home in the past 8 years, while we've bid farewell to 80—over half of them through death. How do we continue to evolve so that our core remains strong yet adaptable to new people, new voices, new contexts?

When Brother Martin posted 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, nearly 500 years ago, the last thing he expected was that a new and independent church would be born—with his name on the logo to boot!

But he had been drawn in his reading and studying of Scripture to the insight that Jesus Christ crucified and risen was at the heart, soul, and marrow of God's plan to bind up a world that was broken; bringing hope and healing to all humankind.

[4]From *A Place Called Lutheran*, published in the November 2013 issue of The Lutheran Magazine. http://www.thelutheran.com/article/article.cfm?article_id=11705#

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The God who is revealed to us in Jesus, is a God of profound grace. A God whose love is unearned and unearnable. A God in whom mercy trumps judgment. A mighty fortress, yes, but also a constant companion who stoops to lead us out of the maze that would entrap us.

A God who takes the curse and burden of every failed human project onto himself, where it died, with him, so that we can be free.

IF YOU CONTINUE IN MY WORD, Jesus tells us, YOU ARE TRULY MY DISCIPLES AND YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH AND THE TRUTH WILL MAKE YOU FREE.

This is the heritage we celebrate today. And this is the way we live.

AMEN.