

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Reformation Sunday

October 25, 2020

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers, we are living as they say in “unprecedented times.”

We are living, as they say, in a time when we are experiencing a “new norm.”

We are living in a changing world to say the least.

And we shouldn't be all that surprised. I mean, we were actually due for it.

We shouldn't be all that surprised. I mean, we should have seen this coming.

We shouldn't be all that surprised. I mean, it was already waiting there on the horizon.

We shouldn't be all that surprised.

Now, I am not talking about a day of reckoning with respect to racial injustice...

Nor am I talking about the earth's would response to human influence in terms of climate change.

Nor am I talking about the global pandemic, the likes of which we have not really seen since 1918.

So if I am not talking about the coronavirus...

If I am not talking about forest fires and hurricanes...

If I am not talking about our country experiencing civil unrest...

What is it that I am referring to? None other than the changes happening to the Church at large.

Yes, we should not be surprised that the Church is changing.

We were actually due. It was there on the horizon. We should have seen it coming.

Yes, I am referring to the way we are re-thinking “church.”

I am referring to the way we are re-visioning how we worship.

I am referring to the way we are re-imagining how we gather, and how we serve, and who we are as the people of God.

This is what I am talking about when I say that we were due, that we should have seen it coming, that it was there on the horizon.

You see, sisters and brothers in Christ, the church has historically experienced a great upheaval ever 500 years or so.

PAUSE

Think about what we are celebrating today, the Reformation.

It was a little over 500 years ago when Martin Luther nailed the *95 Theses* to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany and sparked a revolution in Germany and throughout all of Europe.

And the Catholic Church, the Western Church, splintered in numerous Protestant Denominations.

And about 500 years before that in the year 1054, the Church had experienced another cataclysmic event, something called the Great Schism.

At that time, there had been one church, but in 1054 the Church split such that there was an Eastern Orthodox Church with its Capital in Constantinople, and there was a Western Roman Church with its capital at the Vatican in Rome.

And prior to that, a little less than 500 years, there was Gregory the Great.

He lived from 540 to 604 A.D.

At this time, the Roman Empire was collapsing and the Dark Ages were just beginning.

And it was Gregory the Great who provided leadership to the Church in this time of great flux.

Yes, it seems to be that every 500 years or so, the Church undergoes some great moment of change.

Now, this is not my theory.

It is a theory that was made popular by a woman named Phyllis Tickle who was an American author and lecturer.

Tickle lived from 1934 to 2015.

And hers was a leading voice in what is called the “emergence church movement.”

In her book *The Great Emergence*, she drew upon a thought by an Anglican Bishop named Mark Dyer, whereby she suggests that about every 500 years the church goes through a great transformation.

She listed the great transformations I just mentioned and noted that the contemporary Church is indeed in the throes of another great transformation right now.

And Friends, it may be that the church has been transforming for a while and it is the pandemic that has only sped up the process.

Regardless, the Church at large is changing.

It is becoming something different.

Part of that change no doubt revolves around, for good or for bad, a greater reliance on technology.

Churches have been forced to find ways to connect with their membership in their homes.

Churches have needed to find ways to reach out since we have had to redefine what it means to gather safely.

Churches have been obliged to think about what it means to be “church” out there in different places, then altogether in one place.

Church is becoming more and more the church scattered than it is the church gathered.

And maybe that is not such a bad thing.

Now don't get me wrong, I like it when we can come together and worship together as one body.

I like seeing other faces.

And I miss singing with all of our voices together.

I miss seeing us working side by side on projects like GermanFest and egg making, Family Promise and the SouperBowl.

I miss the comradery. I miss the fellowship. I miss the people moving freely in and out of the building as they once did.

And I do long for the day when we will be able to do all those things again without having to worry about infecting one another with a virus.

But at the same time, I do think some things will continue to be different moving forward.

I do think Zoom meetings will continue to be around at least for a long while yet, and maybe indefinitely.

I do think a virtual form of worship will continue to be ongoing.

Our leadership is beginning to think about how we can livestream worship, in addition to providing a recorded service.

We are beginning to think about how we can create a better worship experience in the overflow room in the Fellowship Hall, such that we can provide a video feed into the room as well as audio.

These things are going to be around for a while.

And who knows, these things may become more and more a blessing.

Maybe the overflow worship space becomes a place for folks to worship more casually, such that parents will have their young children present, with toys on the table top to keep them occupied, toys for the young kids not the adults.

Maybe the overflow worship space becomes a casual space for people to drink coffee freely at a table, while experiencing the service.

Maybe the overflow worship space can be a place for folks who want horizontal space in front of them to have their bibles open during worship, or to take notes during the sermon.

How is that for optimism? Right? Taking notes during the sermon.

And so now that we are already using that space during worship, we might as well think creatively about that space, and how it could lend itself for worship.

Another blessing is distant virtual worship, which has become more and more a regular habit for folks, especially those who may not be able to join us for worship on Sunday mornings.

I know that in past, this is even before the pandemic began...

I know that there have been many people who have told me that getting up on a Sunday morning and getting to church was just not feasible.

They just were not able to do what they needed to do in the morning to prepare themselves and still be on time for worship.

So, maybe those folks won't need to fret about that in the future.

Maybe instead we will livestream our service, and those folks can simply roll out of bed, and sit at their kitchen table with a laptop computer and watch worship.

Indeed, with the recorded service, people can already watch worship whenever they find it is the best time for them to do so, but livestream would make worship available at the same time as the church gathers on Sunday morning.

Now some of us might be saying to ourselves that at the very least people should be able to get up and get themselves ready for church on Sunday morning.

But that just might not be the reality for everyone.

And it is not so much about the church having to make concessions, but it is about trying to meet people where they are.

The Church has always been about trying to meet people where they are.

That is what we do. That is what Jesus did in his ministry.

Jesus didn't stay in a building, but he went out to meet people where they were in the world. He brought good news to them.

For some, even many, Sunday morning in a church building is not where they are any more.

And so the church needs to go out and connect with folks in their homes, and at different times in the week.

And, yes, communion then becomes something of a challenge, since the sacrament is really meant to be celebrated in person with one another.

So then, maybe it becomes necessary to re-visit the idea of layperson visitation.

Several years ago we had started such a ministry, but it might be time for us to resurrect that ministry, such that our members go out and commune persons wherever they are residing, at home, in a rehab unit, you name it.

Church is changing, Folks.

But it doesn't have to mean the beginning of the end. It doesn't have to mean that we go into panic mode.

But what it does mean is that we have to start with the basics and think about how those basics might be packaged and delivered in a new way.

It is like Amazon delivering to the door of our homes. It is like Grub Hub delivering to the door of our homes.

These companies get it. You need to meet people where they are.

We all need to rethink how you do what you do.

But you still stick to the basics.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Listen to that again, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

If we stick to the basics, if we continue in God's word, we can't go wrong.

If we stick to God's Word, we will be truly Jesus's disciples, and we will know the truth, and having God's truth with us, we are then set you free to envision a new Church.

Luther said it this way, I'm paraphrasing here, "As long as the Word is preached and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are faithfully administered, how we do worship, how we do 'church,' is really up to each Christian community."

In other words, there is freedom in the gospel such that we are always called to re-imagine what it is that we do as people of God.

But as long as we are faithful to the means of grace—the preached Word and the Sacraments...

As long as we are faithful to God's Word, we are truly free to imagine a different Church, a new Church.

With that said then, these unprecedented times, this new norm, this changing world is an incredible gift...

...for we as the body of Christ have the opportunity right now to remake the Church into something truly life-changing for the world, if we have the courage to do it.

The pandemic has already been forcing our hand to move us to change.

But it may just be that we are to do even more than the pandemic would require of us to meet not just the members of our church where they are.

But indeed the larger Church, Our Saviour included, is being called to meet the people of the world where they are.

What the Church will look like it completely on the other side of this pandemic is hard to say.

I have my ideas that I would be glad to share with you in conversation sometime.

And I would be glad to hear your ideas as well.

But whatever the Church will be, it will be, it has to be, centered on God's Word in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.