

**Lectionary 27 A 2017**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 8, 2017

Occasional Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

In a couple of weeks, there will be a local gathering of pastors and lay people to discuss our synod and what kind of leadership we need as we prepare to elect a new bishop this June. You are welcome to be a part of that two-hour meeting.

We are part of a synod— a confusing word. The Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod is a denomination that is divided into geographic districts. In our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the ELCA, the ancient word “synod” is used differently, to describe the 65 geographic areas that each elect a bishop. And just to make things extra confusing, the Presbyterians, who are divided into “presbyteries,” use the word “synod” to describe the larger areas that the ELCA calls “regions.” District or diocese would be the least confusing word. But Lutherans being Lutherans... Why makes things easy?

Our geographic synod has headquarters in Phoenix, but it is called the Grand Canyon Synod, and it includes both sides of the canyon, including metropolitan Las Vegas. One of the challenges that any bishop of this synod faces is the fact that at least half of the congregations and most of the biggest congregations are clustered in Phoenix. But there are substantial numbers of congregations in Tucson and in Las Vegas, as well as in the more far-flung areas like the White Mountains, Flagstaff, Yuma, Sierra Vista, Lake Havasu, and Saint George, Utah. Keeping in touch with such far-flung communities is difficult. Keeping a balance between Phoenix and the rest of the synod is difficult.

This morning I remind you that we have a special connection, through our synod, to the everyday people of Las Vegas. Lutherans in Las Vegas. Who are in church this morning, just like we are. Who are part of the Grand Canyon Synod, just like we are. Because of our synod, because of the church, I have come to know Las Vegas and its citizens in a way that I would not know them as a tourist. And so their shock and grief after the attack last Sunday night is of immediate Christian concern to us. But their resilience and their competence and their spirit through this tragedy is not a surprise to me.

I have been thinking about recent events in our country on a track that is parallel to our observance of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Does the Reformation have anything good or relevant to say to us in these times or is the Reformation simply a colorful memory of people and issues from the past?

One of the key insights of the Reformation is a posture toward life, an outlook on the world and humanity called “Christian Realism.” Christian Realism is about the balance of hope and realism. In the twentieth century, the best spokesperson for Christian Realism was the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. He was renowned in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but he is remembered today for the Serenity Prayer. This was a prayer he introduced and sometimes slightly modified, and it has been slightly modified by popular use. The earliest form of the prayer went like this: *“Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other.”* That original version is slightly different than the one I heard. One of the ways it is different is that it puts courage first, and serenity second. And the other way it is different is that it says “us” rather than “me.” So the more contemporary version that I first heard went like this: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference.* But the prayer is by Reinhold Niebuhr, and it reflects Christian Realism. The effort to balance hope and realism. To change the things that I can and should change. But to gain peace—serenity—about the things that I cannot change. And to figure out which things are which category. True wisdom.

Martin Luther said, in various ways, that without Christ, a human being has only two options: delusion or despair. If you see human nature for what it really is, you will either lose hope, you will despair, unless you have the supernatural help of God. Or you will convince yourself of things that are not true in order to distract yourself from the pain and difficulty of life. That is delusion. When Lutherans use the expression, “by grace alone” or “by grace through faith,” we are acknowledging that we need supernatural help in order to face life as it really is. This is Christian Realism. To do life right, to live life the best, we rely on God. Lutherans use the word “grace”—which means gift. The serenity prayer asks for three specific graces: *Courage, serenity, and wisdom.* Whereas Lutheranism uses the medieval language of sin and weakness and grace, the modern prayer acknowledges our reliance upon God, our daily dependence upon him for courage, for serenity, and for wisdom.

I believe that Christian Realism could be the revived, contemporary banner of the Reformation in North America. I mentioned Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther. But Christian Realism is at the core of the Reformation articulated by Luther and Calvin, by Lutherans and Reformed Churches. Furthermore, both Luther and Calvin stressed that they were simply following the great Catholic teacher, Augustine of Hippo. And Saint Augustine built upon the Bible, but especially upon Paul. The Reformed Christians in England even developed a nickname for Saint Augustine: *Austin*. Christian Realism is not owned by a church. It is part of the spirit of Reformation that is both evangelical and catholic, ancient and modern.

More importantly, Christian Realism – from Paul to Augustine to Luther to Calvin to Reinhold Niebuhr and beyond– has a message for Americans. Most Americans, most American culture, and most American Christianity is extremely idealistic. Or wants to be. When humans invest heavily in dreams and ideals, and those ideals fail, then humans become extremely bitter,

extremely angry, extremely cynical. In America right now we are seeing the consequence of broken dreams and shattered ideals. And then people retreating to their corners, to their closed rooms, and doubling down, investing even more in those ideals. Without Christ, Luther said, humans fall into delusion or despair. Without the supernatural grace of God, in response to despair, humans go deeper into delusion.

The serenity prayer asks for serenity, for courage, and for wisdom. That is what Christian Realism seeks. Without Christian Realism, we have the opposite of serenity: strife. Without Christian Realism, we have the opposite of courage: fear. And without Christian Realism, we have the opposite of wisdom: madness. We saw all of that in the Grand Canyon Synod this week, in Clark County, Nevada.

American people are having a huge crisis of confidence in social institutions. The media and the political parties have obviously lost the trust of the public, as has Congress in particular, and government in general. But not just those institutions, but churches, neighborhoods, and above all, the family— are breaking down. From a lack of confidence. Christian Realism is wary of human institutions. The Reformation itself was anti-institutional, against the abuse of power by the institutional church. But Christian Realism is also wary of unbridled individualism. Christian Realism is skeptical of the idealism that private individuals whose main connections to the world are cable television and the internet are going to thrive or to understand basic realities of life on earth, and of life in the human species.

I have this parable that I made up. In Tucson, there are two drivers. Driving on our roads and freeways. One is a left-winger. And one is a right-winger. And they have each decided, separately, that traffic signals are instruments of oppression. They have each decided, separately, that for them, red will mean “Go.” And green will mean “Stop.”

The left-wing driver has decided that traffic signals are an instrument of oppression. They are colonialist, imperialist, sexist, hetero-normative, classist, instruments that play a part in a conspiracy that oppresses and lies. The right-wing driver has decided that traffic signals are part of an expanding government that is suppressing liberty, persecuting religious freedom, and promoting atheist propaganda as part of a conspiracy that oppresses and lies. So each driver, left and right, has decided, separately, that for them red will mean “Go.” And green will mean “Stop.” They do not accept fake news. They do not believe in common, shared truth and reality.

And that is madness. And it is not going to work out well for Tucson.

Christian Realism should be the renewed voice of the Reformation in our time. Christian Realism is not idealistic, but it is hopeful. Christian Realism is not cynical, but it is wary. Individual power is needed to balance institutional power. But institutional power is needed to balance

individual power. And traditions, and communities, and families give us the confidence and the trust to keep our society balanced and upright and moving in a straight line.

*“God, grant us the courage to change the things we can, the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, and the wisdom to know the one from the other.” Amen.*