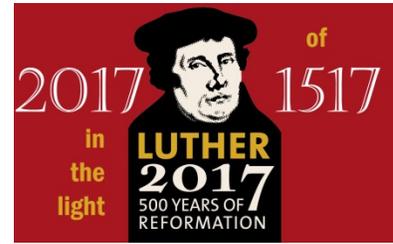


2017 IN THE LIGHT OF 1517
Keynote Address Part 2
by the Rev. Dr. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson
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Yesterday I talked about 1517 in the light of 2017: namely, recalling the faith convictions that motivated events five hundred years ago with an eye to the commemoration taking place in two years' time. Today I'm going to turn it around and explore what that commemoration might look like, now that we have Luther's confession fresh in our minds.

To get there, I'm going to do two things. First, I'll present five snapshots of Lutheranism in the half-millennium since 1517, from the seventeenth century up to the twentieth. Church history is often disregarded as not really relevant to today's needs, but I find there is little else that does such a good job at expanding our imaginations as to the ways people and cultures can respond to the gospel. After that I'll make five concrete suggestions for the observance of the anniversary, now in the twenty-first century, actions that are faithful both to our 1517 origins and to the far distances we have traveled as Lutheran Christians since that time.

FIVE SNAPSHOTS FROM LUTHERAN HISTORY

1. 17th Century: Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg in Austria and Germany

We don't generally associate the nation of Austria with Lutheranism, and with good reason. Following the Reformation, there had been a significant population of landed gentry of the Lutheran confession living in Austria. But not after the Thirty Years' War ended. By the terms of the Treaty of Westphalia, Lutherans were not allowed to attend services, hire religious tutors for their children, or receive holy communion in their own homes. Most simply emigrated. Those who stayed had little recourse but to undertake communion pilgrimages: long journeys to Lutheran lands to receive the Lord's Supper.

It was on one of these communion pilgrimages that a twenty-two-year-old woman by the name of Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg had a profound spiritual awakening. At the reception of the sacrament, she beheld what she called the "Deoglori- Light" and the "Goddess of Her Soul," and she felt herself called to become a public witness to her faith. Needless to say, this was hardly a usual move for a Lutheran in hostile Austria, much less for a woman. But it came as no surprise to Catharina's mother. During her pregnancy, Eva Maria von Greiffenberg had become dangerously ill and so, patterning herself after Hannah in the Old Testament, consecrated the child in her womb to God if only the child's life would be spared.

The grown Catharina eventually got married and hung on in Austria as long as she could, but after her husband's death and the threats of creditors, she finally emigrated too, to Nuremberg in Bavaria, a safe haven for Lutheranism. Despite her sorrow at leaving her homeland, she quickly established herself in prominent literary circles and devoted the rest of her life to writing religious meditations in both poetry and prose. So warmly were they received that at one time Catharina was the best-read woman in all of German letters. She ended up publishing more than four thousand pages under titles such as "The Supremely Holy and Supremely Salvific Suffering and Dying of Jesus Christ," "The Supremely Holy Incarnation, Birth, and Youth of Jesus Christ," and "The Supremely Holy Life of Jesus Christ"—and she died before she could finish an intended fourth volume on Christ's resurrection and ascension and the holy Trinity.

The Virgin Mary was a favorite theme of Catharina's writings. As a woman in an era that still severely limited women's public roles, the mother of God was reason enough to defend the female sex. Catharina knew Luther's theology so perhaps he inspired her use of the *communicatio idiomatum* theme in this address that Catharina places on Mary's lips: "Holiness is not diminished when it takes up sin and takes on the sinners and takes away their frailties. It becomes only that much holier in the hearts of those made holy when it swallows up their unholiness, heals their frailties, and brings about sanctification in them, namely, through precisely that spirit that undertakes to form the Savior's body in mine."

Catharina also saw that love for the mother of God spills into love for the tiny life that she and all mothers shelter within them. At Catharina's time, early science was just realizing that the fetus goes through developmental stages within the womb instead of being a tiny adult that just gets bigger. This set Catharina's imagination on fire when she realized that Jesus, too, had passed through every stage of human prenatal development: "the Greatest of All," as she observed, "became small for us." So Catharina addressed these praises to the fetal Christ: "Blessed be every little morsel of the brain, every little coil of the blood vessels, every little spark of spirit, every little piece of the brain, from which the inner part of the head is composed! ... and the charming little nose... [and the] middle vein, the pulmonary, cephalic, hepatic, and purple veins, and all the other veinlets and lesser little blood vessels, whatever they are called. A thousand times blessed be each little droplet of blood that flows in these most noble veins and that later will flow from them on the cross for the sake of the forgiveness of our sins and finally [will flow] even in Holy Communion in our mouth for the purpose of sealing that forgiveness..." Tell me, how often have you sung the praises of Christ's hepatic veins?

After a prolific career, Catharina died on April 8, 1694, which was Easter Monday. No longer kept from the sacrament, she had received the Lord's Supper for the last time on Good Friday.

B. 18th Century: Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Vedanayagam Sastriar in India

In 1706, the German Pietist missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg arrived in the Danish colony of Tranquebar in India to establish a Lutheran church. Three hundred years later, in 2006, ten thousand people gathered in Tranquebar to remember and celebrate this man, who is a household name in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The national government issued a commemorative stamp, and Hindus and Muslims joined in the celebrations just as eagerly as Christians. In fact, the first English-language study of Ziegenbalg's life and ministry, entitled *The First Protestant Missionary to India*, was by a fan named Brijraj Singh—who happened to be a Hindu. The title is correct: the Lutheran Ziegenbalg preceded the better-known Anglican and Reformed missionaries to India by a century. And not only that: more recently, Tamil scholar Daniel Jeyaraj has awarded Ziegenbalg the moniker “the father of modern Protestant mission.” This, despite the fact that Ziegenbalg lasted only thirteen years before he died an untimely death, due to relentless persecution from his fellow Europeans, the colonial governor, and other missionaries, and by then had only baptized 250 Indians into the Christian faith.

Ziegenbalg did not arrive the ideal missionary. Like all too many of his kind before and since, he assumed the Tamils were uncivilized and required European enlightenment to become Christian, if not human. What changed things for him was his mastery of the Tamil language. He attended Tamil classes for children, took up residence among the slaves in the Tamil quarter, and almost immediately began to see his mission objects in a new light, as subjects equally made in the image of God.

A more dramatic consequence followed from this: Tamils ought not be required to adopt European ways of being Christian. Not only was their own language legitimate; not only their own dress; but even their own religious traditions. Now credited with being “the first Indologist,” Ziegenbalg inaugurated the study of other religions among Christians and became the world's first European expert on Hinduism. He began collecting Tamil palm-leaf manuscripts and studied the Bhakti spirituality of Hinduism that was dominant among the Tamils. He encouraged the Tamils he met to reconsider to whom they offered their devotion, but not necessarily how they did it. To be sure, he opposed practices he found to be at odds with the gospel, such as the *davadasi* women consecrated to temple life or the burning of widows. But his respect and openness for indigenous spirituality was without precedent or peer.

In due course Ziegenbalg built a church—the Jerusalem Church, which stands to this day—as well as a seminary for the training of indigenous leaders, schools for both boys and girls, and orphanages. He translated and printed the whole of the New Testament in Tamil, and was still working on the Old Testament when he died. Akin to Luther's codification of German through his Bible translation, Ziegenbalg gave modern Tamil its form. Right in the face of aggressive empire, Ziegenbalg affirmed, protected, and promoted indigenous Tamil culture—for gospel reasons. At the same time, on account of the same gospel, he sought to remove and suppress those elements of the culture that opposed human dignity and flourishing.

Later in the eighteenth century, the exact kind of Tamil appropriation of the gospel that Ziegenbalg had worked for came to flower in the person of Vedanayagam Pillai. He was a Tamil Lutheran poet, dramatist, and evangelist—and like Ziegenbalg, received accolades not only from Christians but from Muslims as well, receiving the gift of the traditional red hat worn by Muslim teachers. Vedanayagam believed the gospel fervently but he also admired the literary traditions of Tamil Hinduism, so he adopted the latter for his own evangelistic purposes, including lullabies, street theater, and laments. His most famous piece was entitled “The Fortune Teller’s Dance-Drama of the Lord of Bethlehem.” Vedanayagam composed an entire hymnal—which took him fortyfive years!—of Christian hymns set to south Indian classical music of the same bhakti tradition that Ziegenbalg had come to admire. And all this while teaching at both the elementary school level and in the seminary, in addition to evangelistic tours. Vedanayagam once spent a month and a half expounding Lutheran teaching in the Kalatcepam style, in which the sermon is interspersed with singing led by a band. He was never ordained but received glowing titles from church leaders: “Grand Master of Scripture and Poems of Superior Wisdom,” “The Caesar among Evangelical Bards,” “The Royal Bard Who Is the Light of Wisdom,” and “Scholar of Scripture.” “Scholar” in Tamil is Sastriar, and the name stuck to the man, who is now known as Vedanayagam Sastriar. To this day, his hymns are sung by Indian Christians and his work remains a shining example of the gospel-indigenization process.

C. 19th Century: Paavo Ruotsalainen and the Awakening in Finland

It may come as a surprise to you to learn that Lutheran history is full of revival movements. We usually associate such things with the early American frontiers or camp meetings sponsored by preachers of dubious credentials, but the fact is that, regardless of the denomination or confessional tradition, living Christianity gives rise to revival movements.

Finland has been particularly rich in them. One of the most influential, called the Awakening, was greatly inspired by a farmer and lay preacher by the name of Paavo Ruotsalainen. The Awakening was already about two decades old by the time Paavo came to prominence. It had different flavors, depending on which part of the country it was in: for example, in the western part, the clergy had the leading role, and literary rates were higher so the reading of devotional texts received more of an emphasis. In the east, laypeople were always the leaders and there was more of what we today would call charismatic phenomena, like speaking in tongues and prophetic trances. Some leaders were quite rigid about the rules for prayer and holy life; Paavo, by contrast, allowed for more freedom and was as notable for his fearless consumption of alcohol as his inspired preaching. The Awakening was so influential that it aroused fear among the state authorities, so for awhile conventicles (or religious small group meetings) were actually outlawed. The state church was fairly nervous too, perhaps because Paavo had earned himself the nickname “the bishop of two dioceses.” The Finnish Lutheran Church at that time only had two dioceses!

Paavo had always been religiously sensitive: he got his first Bible at the age of six and had read it through three times before confirmation, and after that spent about ten years in existential agonies about the state of his soul—his first nickname had been “foolish Paavo” for being so preoccupied with godly matters. As a young adult he heard about a lay preacher named Jakob Högman, who was known to do great things for the anguished, so Paavo immediately set off and walked 125 miles through the Finnish winter to meet him. Högman’s message was the one that set Paavo’s heart at rest, for he taught that it is in the very state of spiritual poverty that Christ comes to us.

From then on, the spiritually impoverished Paavo lived in a state of evangelical joy and devoted his life to spreading the good news. It’s estimated that he walked 25,000 miles in the course of his life, up and down the length of Finland and in all weathers, to preach, teach, and console. He emphasized truthfulness before God: don’t invent faith or religious emotion if you don’t have it, he always said. But turn to God with this unfaith and yearn for something better, as the father of the sick son says in Mark’s Gospel: “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!” Paavo never doubted whether a godless person could receive mercy. His point, in fact, was that people are saved as godless and only as godless—Christ comes for the sick not the well, for his enemies not his allies. What matters is not who we are or what we do, but who God is and what God does. Paavo’s was a revival that de-centered the self and put Christ back at the heart of things.

D. 20th Century: Gudina Tumsa and Tsehay Tolessa in Ethiopia

It would have been easy for Pastor Gudina Tumsa, the outspoken General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, to escape. His friends had made all the arrangements. Christian Krause, a German pastor friend with long experience of helping refugees from east Africa, brought news of the offer. They would spirit him over the Ethiopian border, through Kenya and into Tanzania, where he would be offered asylum. Gudina’s son had already fled the country, and it would be the best thing for Gudina, too, not to mention his wife Tsehay and their daughters. All he had to do was say yes.

But Gudina did not say yes. Far from accepting his friends’ best intentions with relief and gratitude, Gudina seized Christian by the lapels, shook him violently, and cried out, “Don’t tempt me! Here is my church and my congregation. How can I, as a church leader, leave my flock at this moment of trial? I have again and again pleaded with my pastors to stay on.” Then he quoted II Corinthians 5:15. “Christ died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” (Note the language of exchange!) Gudina concluded, “Never ever will I escape.”

Gudina remained true to his word. Twice he was arrested by the secret police of the Communist Derg regime in Ethiopia under the violent leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam. The third and final arrest came on the night of July 28, 1979. Gudina was abducted off the street on the way home from teaching a Bible study. He was brutally murdered, his body dumped in an unmarked grave near the occupied emperor’s palace.

But no news was given to the family or the church. For the next thirteen years they were caught between fear and hope, never knowing if Gudina still lived in a wretched cell somewhere or had been put to death. Only after the fall of the regime in 1991 were they able to put the pieces together and locate Gudina's remains. He received a Christian burial on June 27, 1992.

In many ways, though, Gudina the martyr might be considered the lucky one. The same night of his abduction, his wife Tsehay Tolessa was arrested as well. Initially released, the day soon came when she was thrown into prison—without accusation, trial, or sentence—and there she stayed for ten years. At the beginning of her imprisonment she was subjected to unimaginable torture. Even when the worst of the torture was over, the conditions in which she spent the next decade were appalling: overcrowding, substandard sanitation, inadequate food, no heat in the winter or fresh air in the summer, infestations of insects and rodents, not to mention the pervasive air of fear and death.

What made these two people, a loving couple who had given life to six children, such a threat to the Communist government of Ethiopia? Why did the Derg need to silence Gudina's voice forever and lock Tsehay away for a decade?

Gudina was dangerous because, however much he opposed the tyranny of the emperor and the old ecclesiastical regime, he was not deceived by the true spirit of the new atheist regime. He insisted on care for the human body, but he would not accept the materialist conviction that humans are only body. His holistic approach to Christian ministry had even brought him into conflict with European mission agencies, who tended to support either evangelization or development, but not both at the same time. In his years as General Secretary, Gudina had articulated a vision of caring for the whole person, body and soul alike, individual and community alike. He would not accept false dichotomies no matter where they came from. And he certainly would not keep silent in the face of atrocities, even if rubber-stamped by the supposedly progressive revolutionary party.

And Tsehay? Her crime was being Gudina's wife and a faithful Christian herself. She was not a political activist, not a troublemaker, not a subversive, only a pious woman of prayer and service. That was enough. Enough to be locked away and forgotten for ten years.

With good reason, Gudina Tumsa has been nicknamed "the Ethiopian Bonhoeffer." Like his German counterpart, Gudina was a pastor who brooked no opposition between evangelical and diaconal work. Both of them combined theological study and prayer with active ministry and care of souls. Both found their Christian convictions leading them to take a political stance of opposition against the powers and principalities. Both ultimately died as enemies of the state—even as Jesus did—yet are rightly regarded as Christian martyrs.

Gudina's impact on his church has been extraordinary, truly a case where death could not stop his work. Since the 1970s, when the Ethiopian church had only about two hundred thousand members, it has grown to over seven million. Gudina's holistic vision shapes their combined development-evangelism strategy and translation work. Ethiopia is the best embodiment of Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers: there are about twenty-six hundred ordained clergy, eighty-six hundred congregations, and three hundred thousand lay preachers! Tsehay, after her release from prison, went on to start new churches and continued to live out the mission of holistic ministry. I can only hope that the recently arrived Ethiopian Lutherans in this country will be generous in sharing their wisdom and experience in giving new life to our own calling to be Lutheran Christians.

E. 20th Century: Nenilava in Madagascar

Rather like in Finland, Madagascar's revival movements have stayed within the framework of the Lutheran church. In fact, they've had four revivals in the past century and a half, all of which are still going! Most Malagasy pastors come through these movements, and countless lay leaders in the Malagasy Lutheran Church carry out other ministries such as catechist, evangelist, and shepherd (which means, in their context, exorcist). Today this church counts somewhere between three and four million people—and by some estimates, two-thirds of the membership is due somehow or other to the ministry of Germaine Volahavana, better known as Nenilava or Tall Mother.

Nenilava grew up the daughter of a pagan healer, and long before she had any exposure to Christianity she'd become skeptical about her father's claims of power. At the age of ten she began to have two recurring dreams. One was of a man robed in white who washed her feet. Another was of being lifted up by a net into heaven. At the age of twelve she started hearing a voice calling her name; she thought it must be God. Her father, perplexed by her behavior, consulted his oracle and got from it shocking news: the Spirit speaking to Nenilava was the supreme God, and Nenilava herself was a queen to whom he, her father, ought to defer as if a slave. Remarkably enough, her father accepted the oracular rebuke, put aside all his idols, and told the family to obey the God that Nenilava worshipped.

In the meanwhile, Nenilava's parents had arranged for her to be married to a sixty-something Christian catechist. To do so, she had to go through catechism classes and be baptized, which she was glad to do: she learned all her catechism lessons in a mere two weeks! After her marriage, which took place when she was twenty-one, she received her call into ministry in this way: Another catechist was having no luck casting an evil spirit out of a girl. A voice told Nenilava to do something. She went and held the girl until the evil spirit gave up, testifying that "the One who is stronger than we are is coming." And with that the girl was well again. The very next day—August 2, 1941—Jesus told Nenilava and two others to preach the good news to the Matitanana and Ambohibe tribes. Nenilava agreed on the condition that Jesus would tell her what to

say, and he promised to do so. This date is still commemorated by the Malagasy; the consecration of their shepherds takes place on August 2 each year.

It seems that Nenilava and Jesus were on exceptionally close terms. He not only told her what to say but instructed her directly in foreign languages so she could preach in them—twelve languages altogether—and he gave her the gift of tongues for private prayers, though not for public teaching. At one point, she appeared to be dead for three days, but when she came back to her senses she explained that she had been lifted up to heaven for instruction in the gospels, and recommenced her mission by preaching on I Corinthians 15 and the resurrection.

Soon thereafter Nenilava began her itinerant missionary campaign. She worked with pastors and churches to pray with people, heal and exorcize them, intervene in family disputes and offer pastoral care. Preaching the good news and the laying-on of hands with words of comfort from the Bible were cornerstones of her ministry. She set up tobys, revival centers for care of the physically and mentally ill, which eventually turned into settlements as healed people stayed on to help the new sick arrivals. And she kept at it until her death in 1998.

Her story sounds like something out of the hagiographies of the apostles or the earliest missionary saints. But if then, why not now? I spent two and a half weeks in Madagascar last year and everyone talked about Nenilava with love and admiration. They freely acknowledge her as a prophetess—but also make it quite clear that it was years before they were willing to acknowledge her as one. They recognized the need for slow and careful ecclesial discernment. But in the end her singleminded devotion to Jesus and her ministry of liberation for the possessed, sick, and lost convinced them. Late in life she donned a garment based on the priestly ephod of Exodus and during a liturgy was crowned as prophetess by a Malagasy Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Dr. Péri Rasolondraibe, who worked at the Lutheran World Federation offices in Geneva in development for ten years. If you count by sheer numbers, even though she is virtually unknown outside her homeland, I think she may be the most influential Lutheran woman who has ever lived.

FIVE WAYS TO COMMEMORATE THE REFORMATION ANNIVERSARY IN 2017

So now, to wrap up, let's look quickly at five ways to faithfully commemorate the Reformation anniversary in 2017.

1. Support Bible societies & translation programs

One of the most important discoveries of the Reformation was that the vernacular language is not just a practical issue—it is a theological issue as well. God can and will speak in every language, and the Bible is still the Bible even when it's been translated.

If you have any concerns at all about globalization and its homogenizing effect— not to mention a passion to share the gospel—then the very best thing you can do is sponsor the translation of the Bible into languages that don't yet have it. Time and time again, Bible translation has preserved tiny cultures and languages from the omnivorous forces around them and given them the hope to survive into the future. Nobody has invested as much energy into learning, codifying, and writing down the world's languages as Bible translators. Supporting this work is a great way to serve our neighbors and to live out our Reformation heritage today. I'd commend to you Lutheran Bible Translators, which gets the highest rating on Charity Navigator of four stars and a flat-out 100% for transparency and accountability.

2. Luther Reading Challenge

Reading was always at the heart of Luther's reforms, Scripture above all but also early church fathers, mystics, scholastics, and devotional writers. If you want to access the heart of Reformation theology, there's no better way to do it than to read Luther.

But it can be hard to know where to start, and it can be lonely to do it on your own—for which reason I created the Luther Reading Challenge, a free online site where anybody can read and discuss Luther texts from now till the end of 2017. I know what you're thinking—sounds like another opportunity for an online bloodbath. But before participants can comment they have to read Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment, and it's worked! In our three months thus far, with over 1600 registered participants, we haven't had a single outburst of nastiness.

The Challenge started with the Ninety-Five Theses, of course, and moves forward chronologically. The readings aren't cumulative, so you can dip in and out as time permits. Some congregations have already structured adult study programs around the readings. It's a good way to remember why our churches and people identify themselves as "Lutheran." <www.lutherreadingchallenge.org>

3. Ecumenical activities

As I already mentioned yesterday, 2017 will be the first Reformation anniversary in the ecumenical era. Lutherans have been at the forefront of ecumenical efforts, and it is widely acknowledged that the best bilateral dialogue to date is the Lutheran-Roman Catholic one. A lot has changed between us in the past fifty years to undo the damage of the four hundred and fifty years preceding.

How to bring it home? I can suggest no better resource than "From Conflict to Communion," a statement issued in 2013 by the international Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, which traces the history between Lutherans and Catholics, analyzes their respective theologies, and makes concrete suggestions for reconciliation. If you have good relations with local Catholics, I strongly urge you to suggest working through it

together. In due course there will also be a liturgy drafted by the same dialogue team for use by Lutheran-Catholic groups in 2017, so stay tuned for that!

And if the statement itself proves a bit challenging for congregational usage, not to worry—the Southwest Pennsylvania Synod has just put out a study guide for laity, and it's free to the public.

If this proves to be a hit, you might also consider doing a similar process with your Mennonite neighbors. At the 2010 Lutheran World Federation Assembly, the Lutherans issued an apology and request for forgiveness to the Mennonites, heirs to the Anabaptists, based on the findings of a jointly-told history of our bad relations in the sixteenth century, which was principally our fault. The Mennonites responded at the same event with a statement of forgiveness. The history, entitled *Healing Memories*, exposes an ugly episode in Lutheran history of which we ought to repent—but it also demonstrates very powerfully how the gospel can heal the wounds of history.

All available at <www.strasbourg-institute.org>.

4. Preach the law

My last two recommendations pertain more directly to the worship life of the congregation. The first will probably startle you after all I've said so far: I exhort you to preach the law.

Why? Well, speaking of ecumenical reconciliation with Catholics and Mennonites, we have another and even worse piece of bad history on our Lutheran conscience, namely our dealings with the Jews. It does seem that people outside the fold associate Luther more with his anti-Judaism than anything else. I certainly have no wish to defend him on that score, though the even sadder truth is that Luther didn't say anything that countless Christians before and after him didn't say as well. In reality, Luther's worst tirades against the Jews dropped from the scene not long after his death and were only unearthed in the 1930s, by whom and for what purpose you can easily imagine. Before that, Luther was even celebrated by nineteenth-century European Jews as a prophet of religious freedom!

But what does this have to do with preaching the law? It is one of the oldest and worst habits of Christian theology to exalt itself at the expense of the Jewish law, despite the fact that it is still part of our canon of holy Scripture. Yes, of course, with the ingrafting of the Gentiles, the Jewish apostles realized that they were not bound to observe the law of Israel. But not because that law was evil. The Pharisees distorted the intention of the law, but that did not make the law wicked in itself. There is no good creation or heavenly kingdom without law: the law serves to protect and guide and shape human life. Our sin is what turns the law into accusation, but even in the life to come there will be things forbidden, and rightly so. No one will consider it a burden that torture is forbidden in heaven!

Yet it has been a trope of Christian preaching to regard the Jewish law as bad, and a trope of Lutheran preaching to regard any law as bad. This is just self-deception. We all live and act according to some law, which may well turn out not to be Christian at all on closer inspection. Declaring simplistic freedom from the law will ultimately result in enslavement to another law that has been clever enough to keep a low profile.

And it's certainly not faithful to Luther, whatever we have been taught. Our reformer was capable of saying things like "the law is the best thing in the world"—its only "flaw," if you want to call it that, is that it doesn't justify; but then, it doesn't need to, since the gospel does. Luther devoted twice as much space to the Ten Commandments in his Large Catechism as to the Creed, and in many places he even speaks positively of Jewish law—not as a binding requirement for Gentiles in order to be grafted into Israel's salvation through Christ, but as a sensible way of organizing human life. I have never heard Lutherans and only rarely other Christians speak warmly of Old Testament law or try to appreciate its message for the church today, but it is incumbent upon us to try and divest ourselves of our false prejudices against Jewish teaching. As a synod involved in Lutheran-Jewish dialogue, you are particularly well positioned to lead the way.

So, therefore, I encourage you to examine how you have preached the law in the past, and commit to never again turning it into a trope or an evil to be overcome.

5. Re-confirmation

And finally, what about Reformation Sunday 2017 itself? Here's what I'd suggest: re-confirm your entire congregation.

It would be good to precede it, of course, with some instruction. You could do a preaching series on the Small Catechism in the months preceding, and organize adult studies to look more closely at baptism and the public testimony of faith that is confirmation. There is nothing in our practice of confirmation that requires it to be a one-time only event. It's an affirmation of baptism—something, frankly, we should do every day! There is certainly no limit to calling the Holy Spirit down upon a person—in Acts it happens all the time, even to already-boldly preaching apostles like Peter. In a re-confirmation, you'd have the opportunity to teach Luther's theology through the Catechism in preparation, but you would ultimately make the celebration not about Luther but about God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You would be consecrating the lives of your people, through prayer and the laying-on of hands, once again to their baptismal calling of faith and witness and good works. So consecrated, we Lutherans may even have something to talk about in 2018!