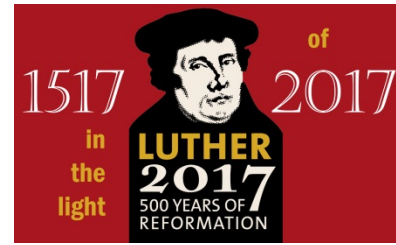


1517 IN THE LIGHT OF 2017
Keynote Address Part 1
by the Rev. Dr. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson
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Can we have Lutheranism without enemies? It's not a question we usually put to ourselves directly, but I suspect it floats at the back of many of our minds. As October 31, 2017 draws nearer, we are going to have to tackle it directly. Because, like it or not, the Reformation anniversary forces the question upon us. This date is the big one because of the 95 Theses: a document meant for internal scholarly debate that, for reasons that remain somewhat mysterious, became the tinder that set all of Western Christendom ablaze. The date itself has conflict written right into it.

In the past this has been a matter of pride. By the first centenary of the Theses, the Lutherans and the Reformed too were eager to declare their enthusiasm for the legacy of the Reformation and celebrated 1617 in high style. Catholics took the opportunity to condemn Luther once again. It is perhaps no accident that the very next year saw the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War, also known as "the wars of religion"—though they were certainly about a lot more than just religion—which turned out to be the ugliest and bloodiest violence that Europe saw until the 20th century. Subsequent centenaries had their own distinctive character, often having more to do with nationalism than faith, and the last one was, unsurprisingly, swallowed up in the First World War, but all of them presumed enemies. And the enemies, for their part, were always more than willing to play their part. There has not been any Lutheranism or any other kind of Protestantism or Roman Catholicism in the past five hundred years not shaped directly by conflict with the other.

PEACETIME

Now as we look to 2017, we find ourselves in quite a different position. Peace has held, more or less, in Europe and North America for a number of decades. Already a century ago the ecumenical movement swept up Protestants, and since the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s Catholics have been committed proponents of Christian reconciliation as well. For the first time since the Theses were posted, there is an option to have a centennial celebration of the Reformation without animosity, without enemies—even though, rather awkwardly, the date still refers us back to the outbreak of conflict. I doubt that most of us here regard Catholics as our natural or inevitable enemies anymore, even if finding our way toward mutual celebration remains a challenge.

But still. Can Lutheranism know itself without needing to have enemies? If Catholics are not our enemies, it might be that others have quietly taken their place. Straw men, perhaps, or caricatures, but still an other over against whom we define ourselves. Maybe it's Protestant Fundamentalists, always good for a laugh and a sneer. Maybe it's

those with differing political or ethical agendas. Maybe it's other Lutherans, denominationally near or far or ex: there is no fighting so bitter as infighting. It's one of the deepest stains of our original sin that we know ourselves by contrast with the detested other.

Nervous about 2017 yet? I hope so. It's a big deal. It demands that we stop and take stock of who we are and where we are and what it means. Commemoration alone is a cop-out. There will be plenty of secular and academic and media giants doing that. We are members of the church, and we are Lutheran, and the demand upon us is consequently that much greater: we need to know what to celebrate and what to repent of. We need to give an account of the hope that is in us, a hope formed by a particular devotional, intellectual, and diaconal tradition, one that still speaks to us powerfully five hundred years later. It's time to say whether we can be Lutherans without any enemies except sin, death, and the devil. If we need other human beings to be the bad guys, we may as well close up shop and find some other way to spend people's money. But if we can do it without enemies—and if what Luther had to say was so rich and true and valuable and lifegiving that we can't just let it quietly die—then that is what has to come to the forefront in our celebrations and in our repentance.

I'm not saying we can be Lutherans without arguments. Good arguments are truly good: they are about seeking the truth instead of resting content in error, they are about knowing God for real instead of offering our worship to idols, they are about courageously putting ourselves on the line, offering clarity to the confused, and accepting correction when deserved. Few of our church conflicts now or in history have ever achieved the blessing of a real proper argument. Mostly we have settled for demonization, cheap shots, shoddy thinking, and mumble-mouthed platitudes. But we won't get very far in a world of competing lords and habitual deceit if we let our minds go. Instead, we ought to make our arguments for the sake of our neighbor, instead of to trump our neighbor; we ought to put our arguments forward in order to testify to the salvation we have found in Jesus Christ, so as not to give the glory to a pretender.

CONFESSION

So, let's get started! Let's begin right here the process of making a confession for 2017. "Confession" is a word that wonderfully has two nuances in English. The more common one is a confession of sin, an admission of wrongdoing. Fittingly, the very first of the 95 Theses declares: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

But confession has a second and more technical meaning, one we know from our charter document, the Augsburg Confession. It is to say before God and the world and one another what we believe and why we believe it: to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as his sisters and brothers, through the faith granted to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Ever since this Confession made at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, in front of the emperor and electors and all the powers that be, Lutherans have understood their churchly existence to be a confessional one.

This means that we do not, for example, recognize ourselves or other Lutherans on account of a common order of worship. Even if the Lutheran Reformation tended to be relatively modest in its modifications of the medieval worship service, a uniform liturgy has never been required. Likewise, we do not recognize Lutherans by a common form of church government: you can be Lutheran with bishops as well as you can without them, you can be more synodical and regional, you can even be more or less congregationalist. Nor do we mandate any particular set of experiences or order of salvation. All of these approaches do have practical strengths: they help build up a recognizable identity and can forge unity across all kinds of borderlines.

But that is not what Lutherans have opted for. We have risked diversity in liturgy, church government, and experience for the sake of unity in our confession. Our identity as Lutherans is intended to point beyond ourselves, toward what, or rather toward whom, we confess.

JESUS CHRIST

We confess Jesus Christ. But what does that mean exactly? The name can turn into another ideological litmus test or a Shibboleth password if we don't flesh it out. Jesus Christ is somebody specific, a real person, divine and human, with a history and a mission and relationships and a seat at the right hand of the Father. We confess all of these things together.

For Luther, the key concept that held all the features of Christ's life and person together was the *communicatio idiomatum*, or the exchange of attributes. Not exactly a catchy slogan, I admit. But the meaning behind it is so rich and wonderful that it should animate and inform all of our speech about our faith. It means, in a nutshell, the joyful entanglement of divine reality with creaturely reality. But that happens first, necessarily, and essentially in one place, in one person, in Jesus Christ. He is from all eternity the Son of God, the Son of the Father, in a bond of love so real and concrete that it is a third Person, the Holy Spirit. In this divine fellowship of love that we call the Holy Trinity—and please note that the Trinity is a fellowship of love, not a math problem!—we already see great exchanges taking place, for God is both authority and obedience, God is both the giving of love and the receiving of it. And the Son, the one who receives love from the Father, in turn passes it on to the creation—the fallen, distorted, assaulted, hostile-to-its-very-source creation. What the Son receives he passes on. And he does it by becoming one with, in the same flesh as, these very hostile and oppressed creatures who like nothing better than to bite the hand that feeds them. The truly divine becomes truly human without ceasing to be divine.

So have said all Christian confessions, time out of mind: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Luther, attentive reader of the Scripture that he was, picked up on overlooked clues and made his confession that much more crystal-clear, knife-sharp, surprising, amazing. The divine and human don't simply dwell side by side, like left brain and right brain, each doing their own thing in a mildly schizophrenic Jesus. The

exchange is for real. As Luther rather comically put it, “You cannot bake anything as closely together as these two natures in Christ.”¹ The humanity of Jesus is given everything that the divinity has: so Luther can boldly confess that the “diaper Lord and manger prince” is the creator of the universe.² This Jesus who liked broiled fish for breakfast, and could get so tired that he’d fall asleep in a boat during a storm, is the very same one who woke to that breakfast from the dead, and told the sea to settle down so he could get some rest! And likewise, equally, the divinity of Jesus is given everything that the humanity has: so Luther could say what was unspeakably shocking to the philosophical world he inherited, namely, that God died, truly, in the body of Jesus Christ nailed to the cross, and that God was raised by God to live again in that same body. It’s why Luther could speak of the impossible: “God’s martyrdom, God’s blood, and God’s death.”³

If we are able speak at all of the impossible, of God or in the name of God, if we can dare to pray to God and expect a response, if we can think of this world with mercy and concern and yet not mistake it for the be-all and end-all of our existence, if in short we dare to bear the name of Christian in public, it is all and only because: Jesus Christ, truly divine, begotten of the Father from eternity, and truly human, born of the Virgin Mary, is our lord.

FANTASTICAL

Maybe this all sounds a bit fantastical. Good! It is! Would you expect anything less of God? This is God we’re talking about, after all. It is our business as Christians, as pastors and lay leaders and Sunday School teachers and so on, to confess to a reality greater than what ordinary eyes and ears perceive. Those with ears, let them hear! Our gospel is not a comforting fiction we have invented—as if there could be anything comforting about God dead on a cross—but a reality that was confessed first by the apostles, which has been passed on to us, across generations, by people who, despite all the odds, have found life and hope and truth in this good news. It is a confession that can stand up to the evils we confront, evils that remain stubbornly resistant to our efforts at overcoming them, evils that infect our own selves and our congregations and our societies and all too often mount to horrifying heights that defy purely rational explanation. I don’t know how else to talk about the gulags or the chattel slavery of the Americas, the Holocaust or the nuclear bomb or what just happened in Charleston without language that stretches beyond the everyday and ordinary. All the more reason that our language of God must learn to do the same as well, to stretch beyond the respectable and ordinary and plausible of the very constricted imagination of our culture.

So this is it. God at the center. Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, sender of the Spirit, at the center. Not the church. Not the denomination. Not our good works. Not our culture or country. Not community or family or charity or any number of other things that are good indeed but are not themselves the center, not themselves the source. If we are not speaking about Christ whenever we speak as the church, then we are really the worst kind of proselytizers, invoking the divine to paint a gloss of holiness on what is just our

own preferred brand of spirituality or togetherness or cultural comfort or activism. That kind of ministry is dangerous and always has been; that's the kind that in the end always requires conflict and enemies.

But that is not the Christian ministry with Christ at the center, as well as at the source and at the end. This ministry is not static but is a dance of exchanges, an ecstatic movement in the original sense of the term—ecstasy, standing outside and beyond ourselves. For if God the holy Trinity is this fellowship of love and exchange, where the Father crowns his Son with authority and his Son hands authority back to the Father, where divinity is cloaked in humanity and humanity is exalted to glory, then the ministry we are sent on is to extend these exchanges even to the fallen and hostile creation, to jerk us and others out of our self-centeredness or our other-human-being-centeredness or our good-cause-centeredness to start living outside the confines of our own little lives, to find our true center in the wilder, richer, vaster life of God.

JOYFUL EXCHANGES

There is no mystical muddle about how to get there. God gave us the means, the means of grace as we call them, to enter into this life of joyful exchanges. They are baptism, communion, and the word.

Baptism, as we all know from the Small Catechism, is not simply water, but water with the Word. We come at Christ's invitation and command, or bring our small people at the same invitation and command, to have the Word done to them. An exchange of identities takes place. The baptized are still members of a family but have now been placed into a larger family, into an enormous adoptive family where blood ties and ethnicity have entirely ceased to matter, where the Lord is also the brother and offers to us his own Father and Spirit. My Father is your Father, as Jesus says again and again, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. The baptized keep their given names but now have another name laid upon them with a permanent claim, the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The baptized live but they have already undergone death by drowning, plunged into the furthest recesses of hell with Christ and drawn up out of the waters into an everlasting life with Christ that is already showing glimpses of itself even here amidst the "ordinary" processes of physics and biology and entropy. Baptism creates an exchange with Christ, a reality that asks to be grasped in faith, that takes sinners and makes of them at the same time saints.

This is no generic claim about human beings, or there being "good and bad in everyone," though that may be true in a way. Baptism is a christological reality. "In Christ there is a new creation," and a relational one: knowing Jesus Christ, being drawn into his life, draws your sin out of you and into his holy, sin-consuming flesh, just as it grants you his own life and blessedness and salvation and allows you to claim your sainthood, not as a personal property that you could brag about but as a gift given and held in your hands and heart, one shared with this new enormous adoptive family ingrafted into the people of Israel.

Already in the early church Christians were worrying about the gap between sinner and saint, between the already and the not yet, between the church and the kingdom. You get baptized into Christ's life and holiness—but then you go and sin again? What do we make of that? The medieval system of penance was one attempt to deal with it and in the process overlooked the fact that God had already provided for us in this regard, too, with his own body and blood, “for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.” That old temptation had crept back in, to put God, even the Christform of God, very high up and far away, making it incumbent upon us to climb up to him. But Christ is not the goal only: he's the starting point and the means to get there, too. God's body is not too holy for sinners to handle—it's exactly because they're sinners and God is holy that the former need to get their hands on the latter! Even Judas shared the Last Supper. If God has called you by name in holy baptism and ingrafted you into His people, He is willing to take the risk of your sin, and He is glad to feed you with His own body and blood to take it away, to infect you with His holiness, to exchange the old flesh of sin for the new flesh of Christ through the ordinary means of eating and drinking.

And in the process, God will once again displace you from your false center by making you part of the one body of Christ throughout the world. Luther famously, infamously, defended the ubiquity of the body of Christ, everywhere at once, for here again the divinity of Christ has handed over all of its powers and properties to the humanity of Christ. It's this ubiquity that makes a truly worldwide church possible. We are ingrafted into Israel, still our root and stock, but now the branches have spread out everywhere. Jesus, the new temple, is not limited to one location or one city but extended to every location, every place where his words of promise are spoken: “This is my body, given for you. This cup is the new testament in my blood, poured out for you.” Christ's body goes wherever his people are. The divine-human exchange in his person makes the divine-human exchange at our altars possible.

Yet baptism only happens once—many of us don't even remember it—and communion takes place at the gathering of the faithful, but what about the rest of the time? Are we left alone to shift for ourselves, or do we infer from the ubiquity doctrine that all encounters with God are the same and equal? Luther comments to this effect: “Although [God] is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there, yet he does not wish that I seek him there apart from the Word, and cast myself into the fire or the water, or hang myself on the rope. He is present everywhere, but he does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way... If Christ were not with me in dungeon, torture, and death, where would I be? He is present there through the Word.”⁴ The Word, as Moses first said and Paul much later quoted, is near to us—on our lips and in our hearts.

And here too we see a joyful exchange at work that animated Luther's Reformation. For the one thing that Babel and Pentecost, otherwise opposites, have in common is that they both reject the notion of a sacred language. No human tongue has a fundamental superiority over the others; God freely submits to the contingency of human linguistics in suffering His holy Scripture to be written down in Hebrew and Greek. And further, still

more importantly, God grants His holy Word to move into other languages too, without limit. Luther argued for the vernacular not merely as a practical matter but as a theological one. The Word can be faithfully translated, “exchanged,” into the heart-language of every tribe on the earth. Interestingly, Luther’s 1530 treatise “On Translating” is considered one of the first works of modern linguistics, in which he offered his observations on the complex processes of rendering Hebrew into German.

Furthermore, this Word that follows us into our own language is itself a joyful exchange: a human text that is divine, a divine text that is human. Historically the tendency has been to choose one over the other. In the one case, the Bible is so holy that it is not safe in human hands, so divine that any suggestion of human limitation or ignorance within it turns into a test of dogmatic belief. Or, in the other case, the Bible is regarded as so human that the best strategy is to tear it to shreds, disprove it, abase it, ignore it, and move on from it. It should be no surprise by now that, from a Lutheran doctrinal perspective, both of these approaches are seriously wrong-headed. They destroy the exchange, the interchange, the joyful mess that comes about when God makes creatures and has fellowship with them despite the enormous ontological gap and the more serious problem of sin. As a human text the Scripture has a history, it has wounds and omissions and repetitions and obscurities, it calls for the hard work of learning vocabulary and grammar and doing research. As a divine text it sheds light on our darkness, it kills and makes alive, it directs and inspires our life and preaching and testimony. Luther’s critical work as a scholar was the direct outgrowth of his love for the Scripture, as this excerpt from his Preface to Romans beautifully captures: “It is well worth a Christian’s while not only to memorize [Romans] word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.”

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

And now finally, where do these three tend, baptism and communion and the Word? Toward this joyful exchange that Luther singled out and that we as Lutherans have celebrated for the last half-millennium: justification by faith. Truth be told, it’s almost as useless a catchphrase as *communicatio idiomatum*. To our English-trained ears, it evokes all the wrong meanings. We hear in it “justice” in a strict legal sense without the tempering of mercy that belongs to the word “righteousness.” Our popular uses of “justify” suggest all the wrong things: “his actions were justified under the circumstances” or “the ends justify the means.” It sounds like saying we weren’t really wrong in our sin after all, and God understands that we were in a tight spot, so don’t worry too much about it. And then there’s the problem of the word “faith”—demoted by now to a defiant act of blind belief without a shred of evidence to back it up, the ultimate good work that is really just a case of stupid stubbornness. We do have our work cut out for us communicating what we celebrate in 2017!

So what is the joyful exchange that is justification by faith—or, translated into today’s English, being made right with God when we grasp that He has grasped us? I can’t do

better than Luther here, so allow me to quote at some length from his magnificent treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*.

“Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?

“Here we have a most pleasing vision not only of communion but of a blessed struggle and victory and salvation and redemption. Christ is God and man in one person. He has neither sinned nor died, and is not condemned, and he cannot sin, die, or be condemned; his righteousness, life, and salvation are unconquerable, eternal, omnipotent. By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride’s. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did all this, and death and hell could not swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel; for his righteousness is greater than the sins of all men, his life stronger than death, his salvation more invincible than hell.

“Thus the believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom.”⁵

Justification by faith always points us back to Christ our center, truly human and truly divine, the great exchange between the two natures in one person. Christ has to be divine as well as human—otherwise our handing over of our sin, death, and damnation to him would be an act of cruelty, not a grateful release from evil powers. Jesus as teacher and exemplar is essential, to be sure: it would not be good news if just any old human being proved to be God’s only-begotten, whether Caesar or Stalin or your sister. The fountain of eternal life comes from one who teaches and embodies self-giving love for others.

But at the same time, self-giving love for others without eternal life, without divine resources, would be just another death sentence. It would be a command without a promise, an ideal that oppresses by its impossibility. We dare not delight in the joyful exchange between Christ and us, between us and our neighbors, between races or classes or nations, if we have not first delighted in the exchange between divine and human in Jesus Christ. This gospel is what makes the love of enemies possible. This gospel is the only thing that makes Lutheranism without enemies possible. Since God first loved us, even when we had turned away from Him, we now have the hope of loving our enemies too, and in loving them, converting them to our friends, through and in and by the power of Christ.

This is our good news, our ministry and our mission. But it's not enough for me to talk about this great gospel or for you to listen. We need to sing it, together! Let's conclude by joining in the beautiful hymn written by Luther's friend and associate, Nikolaus Herman, "Let All Together Praise Our God." Listen closely for the language of exchange!⁶

1 *Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 57 vols., eds. J. F. K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff) [hereafter cited as WA], 32:258, quoted in Johann Anselm Steiger, "The communicatio idiomatum as the Axle and Motor of Luther's Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 128.

2 WA 32:285, quoted in Steiger, 128.

3 *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW], 41:104.

4 LW 36:342–3.

5 LW 31:351–2.

6 LBW 47.