

What is ‘Lutheran’?

We have a particular way of understanding the Jesus story



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For the past two years, I’ve organized my work around these four emphases: we are church, we are Lutheran, we are church together and we are church for the sake of the world.

I want to spend a little time thinking with you about what it means to be Lutheran in the 21st century. What do we mean when we say we are Lutheran? The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is fast upon us,

and this month, as in every October, we will observe Reformation Sunday.

Maybe a good place to start is to ask why it’s important and helpful to have a Lutheran identity. Some would say that denominations and denominational loyalty are things of the past. There is some truth to this, especially if our denomination is defined by ethnicity and culture and our loyalty is primarily to the denomination and not to our Lord.

There was a campaign during the 1980’s church growth movement to get rid of any denominational markers whatsoever. The stolid St. Paul Lutheran Church on the corner was supposed to be renamed something like “The Church at Pheasant Run.” How evocative! How cool! How vaguely woodsy! A simple name change would accomplish two things at once: stop scaring the denominationally averse away and attract tons of people. It didn’t.

In an attempt to become more attractive we became generic. Having a clear sense of who we are and what we believe isn’t a detriment but an asset. If we are well-defined and well-differentiated, we are more able to engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and can be a clear voice in the public square.

But what is “Lutheran”? We chuckle at author Garrison Keillor’s loving caricature of Lutherans. He does describe many of us, but not all of us. I would never disavow the western and northern European heritage of thousands of our people. It’s part of our story. But we also have thousands of

sisters and brothers of African, Asian, Latino/Latina, Native American, and Arab and Middle Eastern descent, some of whom have been Lutheran for generations.

And the Lutheran church is experiencing its greatest growth in the “global south” (Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia). There are more Lutherans in Indonesia than in the ELCA. There are more Lutherans in Ethiopia and Tanzania than in the U.S. There are Lutherans in El Salvador and Japan and India and Mexico and Palestine and Jordan and China and Ireland. The newest Lutheran church is being formed in the world’s newest country. We are working with Sudanese Lutheran pastors to establish a Lutheran church in South Sudan. Jell-O doesn’t routinely show up at the potlucks of these Lutherans. Being Lutheran is not fundamentally about ethnicity.

If culture and cuisine don’t define us, our theology must. Lutherans have a very particular way of understanding the Jesus story. It’s not a movement from unbridled freedom to submission. Rather, it’s the story of God redeeming us from sin, death and the devil, setting us free from our bondage to sin so that, liberated and alive, we may serve God by serving the neighbor. And it’s not about our effort or goodness or hard work. It’s about God’s gracious will to be merciful.

Try this at home: ask family or friends what they must do to be in a right relationship with God. After picking their jaws up off the floor that they were asked such a question, my guess is that people will talk about keeping the commandments, being a better person, reading the Bible more. No. The love of God at work in the crucified Christ creates this right relationship. Our part is to receive this gift in faith.

This is a shattering reversal of the way things have always worked. We don’t have a transactional relationship with God—if I do this then God will do that. It is a transformational relationship. We who were dead in sin have now been made alive. We are free to respond to that deep abiding love. What we eat, what hymns we sing, what jokes we tell, what counties we hail from, what color we are, what we wear—none of this binds us together or makes us Lutheran. It is God’s grace. And that is good news in any language. □

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