

October 29, 2017

Reformation 500 “

Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church
“*What Does This Mean...For Us?*”

Our text today is Romans 8:37-39, “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, no powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“What does this mean?” For half of you, that innocent little question is likely causing you, right now, to have flashbacks to your childhood days.

That’s because, while half of the members of this congregation come from a non-Lutheran church background, or from no previous church at all, the other half of us come from a Lutheran church background.

Those of you who were raised in a Lutheran church, most of you you went to Confirmation class as a child, right? And you studied Luther’s Small Catechism, correct? And, if so, I’m confident that our little question of the day -- “What does this mean?” is engrained in your brain, hard-wired.

In the Catechism, Martin Luther wrote out a series of questions and answers to help young people learn the basics of the faith. And half of us here have had the exquisite joy of memorizing the articles of the Creed, the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and much, much more.

But that wasn’t enough joy, was it? After each Prayer petition, each Creed article, each Commandment, Luther added a powerful question: “What does this mean?” See,

Luther wanted to make sure – and our Lutheran church pastors, growing up, wanted to make sure – that we understood what these chief parts of our faith really meant for our lives. So we had to recite, from memory, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and other gems – and, after each little section, we had to know the answer, from memory, to the question, "What does this mean?" For example, the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

All of you will be glad to know that our 90 current Confirmation students here at Hope are still sharing in the timeless joy of memory work. Did you get your first memory assignment done on time? Your next one is due Wednesday. Commandments 4-6, and the meanings. Just a happy reminder.

"What does this mean?" Whether you're a Lutheran lifer, or you've only been a Lutheran briefly, or whether you're just visiting our church today, this remains a powerful, important question. Forget the Catechism, and memory work. What does all of this mean? What does this Christian faith of ours really mean, for us? What does our system of beliefs, and the way we worship, mean for how we're going to face the struggles and heartaches and fears of the world out there? What does this Reformation anniversary celebration have to do with your neighborhood, your country, your world? What does this mean? What does this cross hanging up there on the wall mean for you, for your kids, for your unchurched friends?

I could easily share my answers with you. I could tell you some of my stories, about how blessed I've been to have been raised in a Christ-centered home, about how comforting God's promises have been in the hard times in

my life. But those are just my answers, and that's just my life.

Or we could easily talk about how your life pretty much gives your answer every day. "What does this mean?" Well, your lifestyle, your decisions and choices, the way you treat others, your budget management, your priorities – all of this is evidence, isn't it, to what your faith and your personal connection to God really mean to you. But those would just be your answers, and your stories, wouldn't they?

Today I want to make sure that we all know where to find God's answers. Because God's answers are always better than any other answers. Let me say that again. God's answers are always better than any other answers. How many of you know that to be true?

Martin Luther knew that truth, back in the 1500's, and he was willing to die for that truth, if he had to. Luther knew where to find God's answers, and he based his life's answers on the Word of God. He knew that his everyday struggles, and his eternal salvation, were all in God's hands. He accepted God's promise that Jesus paid for all his sins, and he was able to let go of his torturous guilt. He faced his enemies and his fears, with a confidence that nothing could ever separate him from the love of God which was his in Christ Jesus. Luther clung to God's answers, no matter what how much anyone turned up the heat on him.

"Stop teaching what you're teaching," he was instructed by the highest church officials and civil authorities. "Do what you're told." They burned his books, they excommunicated him, and they gave him a death sentence. But Luther stood fast, refusing to reject God's answers in favor of other human answers. "Recant!" they ordered him one last time. But Luther responded, "Unless I am convinced by the

testimony of the Scriptures and by clear reason (for I do not trust in the pope or councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

You probably won't have anything quite that dramatic going on in your life this week. Nor will I. But we all will have opportunities to stand up for Christ this week. We'll all face temptations, stand at crossroads, and wrestle with fears and worries. What does our faith mean, in those moments? How does it help? What strength does the cross offer? How sure can we really be about God's love? God's answers are always better than any other answers.

Let's close the way we began, with one of God's answers. Romans 8:37-39, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, no powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.