



Together in Christ

Lutherans and Catholics Commemorating the Reformation

Homily Resources for Epiphany 4

January 29, 2017

The year 2017 marks two important events in the life of our churches: The 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and the 50th anniversary of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue. Over the past 500 years the Reformation has often been celebrated as a triumph by Lutherans, and lamented as a source of division by Catholics. Today, both of our churches are at the point where we can commemorate this event as a significant piece of our shared history. And while the dialogue of the past 50 years has resulted in studies and documents at official levels, it has also been instrumental in seeing increased co-operation and friendship at local levels between the Lutheran and Catholic communities throughout the world. We're praying together, working together, marrying one another and growing together as sisters and brothers.

Together we have reached a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, 1999*, while still acknowledging that differences between us do exist. As we move beyond the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and move more deeply into the year of the Joint Commemoration, we reflect further on the prospects for our own growing unity and on the meaning of that for the church and the world.

Sunday, January 29 is the last Sunday of the 2017 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the theme of which is *Reconciliation: The Love of Christ Compels Us*. On this same day, the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops will launch *Together in Christ: Lutherans and Catholics Commemorating the Reformation*. This is a rich set of materials that will help our faith communities observe this year of commemoration together, and this homily help has been prepared for use in parishes and congregations of both traditions on that day. Feel free to be flexible with this resource, using what will work well in your setting. It is presented for your use in the silence of the study or in the give-and-take of lectionary study groups; it is for preachers and for hearers, for the upbuilding of all as we prepare to observe our anniversaries of reformation and dialogue.

Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew's version of the Beatitudes opens up some interesting space for the preacher. To begin, keep in mind a few important themes for Matthew:

1. Teaching is very important for Matthew. You'll recall that the very last thing that Jesus tells the disciples to do in Matthew is not to make disciples, but to teach; this is, of course, with Baptism, how disciples are made. So the last thing Jesus tells his disciples to do is to teach, and right at the beginning of his public ministry he is found... teaching (unlike in Luke's gospel, where the Beatitudes don't appear until much later in Jesus' public ministry). Teaching, then, forms the bookends for Matthew's gospel.

What new things are we learning as we hear these familiar words of Jesus again? How is this year of commemoration a year of learning for us? What are we being given that will shape us in this time to come?

2. When Matthew wants us to learn something, he takes us up a mountain. Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, and the last temptation occurs when the devil takes him up a high mountain. Jesus' first sermon happens on a mountain in Matthew, whereas in Luke the first sermon is in the synagogue, and the Beatitudes are given on the prairie. Jesus takes a few disciples aside for teaching on the mountain of Transfiguration, and the final scene of Matthew's gospel happens on a mountain (and they don't leave!).

How is this time—at the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity—a mountaintop time for us? And how do we see this mountaintop time as a time to listen and a time to learn?

To help this space open up further, take some time to do a side-by-side reading through Matthew's version (Matthew 5:1–12) and Luke's version (Luke 6:20–26). Take a few moments as well to consider what comes before and after the Beatitudes and the sermons where we find them. The differences raise some questions, and they shed some light on the ways in which Matthew's account might speak to us in this coming year of commemoration.

Blessings or woes? Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is longer—by two and a half chapters!—than Luke's. Here again we see the importance of teaching in this gospel. In addition, Matthew's version is all blessings, unlike Luke's version which has four quick blessings and four quick woes. The content of each blessing is different too, and some have accused Matthew of softening or spiritualizing the blessing on the poor, for example, by adding "in spirit," or the blessing on the hungry by making a quick change to "those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*." It's worth noting at this point that *dikaiosune* in verse 6—which the NRSV translates as "righteousness"—can just as accurately be translated as "justice."

As we read through these Beatitudes, is it important for us to steer clear of a reading that only spiritualizes what Jesus is saying, turning us away from questions of flesh-and-blood matters of poverty, hunger and justice? How do we keep our reflections on unity from becoming reflections on spiritual matters rather than reflections on how we live and serve in a flesh-and-blood world?

Mountains or prairies? As we noted above, Matthew's version finds Jesus ascending the mountain with his as-yet-unnamed disciples, apparently moving away from the crowds. Luke's version has Jesus and the recently-chosen twelve descending to the prairie and joining the crowds there.

For Matthew, this movement up the mountain doesn't suggest an escape from the crowds as much as it suggests a kind of time away for his disciples to consider together, right from the start, a different way of seeing the poor in spirit, the mourning, the ones who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the meek, etc.

Are there ways in which we might understand this time of commemoration as a time not just to ponder and work towards our own unity, but also to reflect together on a new way to see, to live in and to serve the world around us—especially with and among the weak or the suffering?

Disciples or apostles? At this point, and throughout Matthew's gospel, the preferred term for the twelve is *disciples*. Disciples suggests a group of followers, or students, or as has become more common of late, "apprentices." Luke's preferred term will be apostles, which suggests an emphasis on being sent, and being sent in a kind of ambassadorial role.

As we move further into this year of commemoration, how might we think of ourselves as apprentices? What is it that we are learning, and how are we being shaped to receive and to pass on the teachings and the skills that are being given to us for our life together and our life in the world? How does the teaching of the Beatitudes shape our own efforts at reconciliation with each other?

Four? Twelve? How many disciples are there? In Luke's gospel, Jesus teaches the twelve, who are already chosen and named. At this point in Matthew's gospel, though, Jesus has only called four fishers to follow (4:18–22), and the entire group of twelve are not identified until Chapter 10.

Does this incompleteness of the number of Jesus' disciples draw attention to our own sense of incompleteness? As we listen to Jesus' teaching, who is it who is missing from our number—in our church, our society, or our world? What happens if we think of ourselves—the church—not simply as divided, but as incomplete? We are used to thinking of ourselves as a people seeking unity; does our understanding of commemoration and the larger ecumenical project change if we think of ourselves not so much as seeking unity but as awaiting completion, awaiting the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer for unity (John 17)? And having thought that through, how do we live, work and pray as we await fulfillment?

The big switch. This is where Matthew has Jesus sneaking up and catching us off guard. From verse 3 to verse 10 Jesus has spoken in the third person—blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, and so on—but in verse 11 he switches to the second person: *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you;—yes, you—rejoice and be glad.* For eight verses we were lured into thinking that Jesus was talking about “those people,” but now we find that he’s been talking about us all along.

How do we understand ourselves as poor in spirit, hungry because we lack, persecuted (honestly, are we really persecuted?) yet rejoicing, and so on? How does this affect the shape that our life with one another and our life in the world takes?

As we prepare to preach on this familiar but always fresh text, and as we look ahead to the rest of this commemoration year and to our ongoing work of seeking unity, perhaps what we’re being called to do is to see ourselves in a different way. As we approach one another as ecumenical partners, maybe we can learn to see ourselves not as the ones with much to offer, but as the poor, or the hungry, or the meek in the relationship; as the ones who need to receive from the other. And as we live our lives in the world as the body of Christ together, we could begin to see ourselves again not as the ones with so much to offer, but as a one-but-waiting-to-be-one people, in a reconciled-but-awaiting-reconciliation world. We are not separated from each other or separated from any we might call “them;” we await, with a whole weary world, completion and reconciliation.

We’re on top of the mountain, and we are learning that the world is on the mountain with us, and the final word of Jesus to us and to the world is this: “Remember, I am with you.” We are all here together.

