

Reformation Sunday
Romans 3.19-28
October 28, 2007
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

It's Reformation Weekend, the time we set aside each year to recall family history and to remember our future.

It's funny but true that one of the best-known living spokesmen for the American Lutheran family is Garrison Keillor, the creator of "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show and the author of a number of books, including one that just came across my radar screen, though it's been around since 1985: *Lake Wobegon Days* *. You may remember Keillor's pitch for Lake Wobegon: "Where all the women are strong and all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average" ☺.

I'm bringing it up today because included in *Lake Wobegon Days* is a modern-day version (spoof, really) of Luther's original 95 Theses, nailed to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. Since it's always a good idea to take the Gospel **very** seriously, but not to take ourselves **too** seriously, I'm going to share some of Keillor's humor with you. (He's allowed to poke fun because he's a member of the family.)

Here are some excerpts from the 95 Theses that an unhappy fugitive from Lake Wobegon supposedly stuck under the local newspaper editor's door. The author of those theses had grown up in that town and reflected mournfully on some painful parts of his American Lutheran Scandinavian upbringing, with which some of you may identify, even if your hometown isn't Lake Wobegon. Here's an example:

Every Advent we entered the purgatory of *lutefisk*, a repulsive... fishlike dish that tasted of soap and gave off an odor that would gag a goat. We did this in honor of Norwegian ancestors, much as if the survivors of a famine might celebrate their deliverance by feasting on elm bark. I always

felt the cold creeps as Advent approached, knowing that this dread delicacy would be put before me and I'd be told, "Just have a little." Eating "a little" was... as bad as "a lot." (p. 253)

These modern-day theses talk a lot about neatness. The author thinks there may have been an overemphasis ☺. He says:

You brought me up to respect fastidiousness as incarnate virtue... As a tiny child, I lined up my string beans in a row on the plate, taking exactly three per bite. I hesitated to eat the mashed potatoes, lest the little gravy lake spill.... (p. 258)

Despite the fact that the heart of our Reformation tradition is the bedrock belief that we are justified by grace, through faith, apart from the works of the law, there was a lot of self-justification going on in Lake Wobegon....

In our theology, hard work was its own justification, a guard against corruption. Thus, we never bought an automatic dishwasher or a self-cleaning oven or a self-propelled mower with bag attachment, believing they would lead to degeneracy. We raked the grass clippings into a pile and later burned it. We did not use it for garden mulch because mulching keeps weeds down and it was important that children weed the garden, slaving through the long hot afternoons. It was good for them. It kept them from moral turpitude. (p. 259)

The topic of suffering gets it's just due, too.

Suffering was its own reward, to be preferred to pleasure. As Lutherans, we viewed pleasure with suspicion... We were born to suffer. Pain was pooh-poohed. If you broke your leg, walk home and apply ice. Don't complain. Don't baby yourself. Our mothers ironed sheets, underwear, even in July. Our fathers wore out their backs at heavy, senseless labor, pulled their own teeth.... When Grandpa had a heart attack, he took one aspirin and went to bed early.

A year ago, a friend offered to give me a backrub. I declined vociferously. You did this to me. (p. 259)

The topic of compliments intrigues me, too. There's not much difference, I decided, between growing up as a Minnesota Lutheran or a NJ Catholic ☺.

For fear of what it might do to me, you never paid a compliment, and when other people did, you beat it away from me with a stick. “He certainly is looking nice and grown up.” *He’d look a lot nicer if he did something about his skin.* “That’s wonderful how he got that job.” *Yeah, well, we’ll see how long it lasts.* You trained me so well, I now perform this service for myself. I deflect every kind word directed to me... I do this under the impression that it is humility, a becoming quality in a person. Actually, I am starved for a good word, but after the long drought of my youth, no word is quite good enough....

This is comedy because it’s a combination of funny exaggeration and just enough truth that we may just recognize ourselves and our families in it. **No** parents, Lutheran or otherwise, are quite as nutty as the people described here. But, as St. Paul reminds us in today’s letter to the Romans, despite our best efforts, as children or as parents, as workers or bosses, as coaches or players, as couch potatoes or compulsive athletes,

“...we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”
(Romans 3.23)

In another ten years it will be 500 years since the German monk Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses onto the door of the church in Wittenberg. That door was the university bulletin board. Luther wasn’t throwing down a gauntlet to challenge the pope in Rome to battle; he was inviting his fellow college professors to a debate. He disagreed with the sale of indulgences, which were supposed to buy time off in purgatory. If you want to learn more about the ins and outs of indulgences, pick up a copy of the current *Lutheran* magazine (November 2007), which does a nice, concise, understandable job of explaining the 95 theses and their relevance today.

The most important heritage of the Reformation is not *lutefisk* or Sven and Olie jokes or “A Prairie Home Companion.” It is not the writings of Martin Luther or even the work of Johann Sebastian Bach, whose music is so worshipful he has been called “The Fifth Evangelist.” The greatest gift of the Reformation is the insight that, as Martin Luther put it in Thesis #62,

“The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”

The true treasure of the church (not just the Lutheran Church, but the entire Body of Christ, made up of all denominations) is the gospel, the Good News of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. **Simply put, what God has done is to save us.** Yes, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but that is not the end of us. Through our baptism into Jesus’ death and resurrection, **we are saved** from sin, death and the devil.

The gospel, the Good News, is that God’s ability to forgive is greater than our ability to sin. The gospel message is that grace, **God’s love, prevails, triumphs over evil.** Through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1.5)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3.16)

We just can’t **say** it often enough. We just can’t **show** it often enough.

God used Martin Luther to reform his church almost 500 years ago. Luther emphasized that no matter how “reformed” the church is, though, it’s always in need of further reforming, current reformation. We pray today that God will give us eyes to see where and how that needs to happen. When we can laugh at ourselves, as individuals and as a community, we’re acknowledging that we know we’re not perfect. That’s why we need a Savior. Thank heaven we **have** one!! That’s what we celebrate today. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

* Keillor, Garrison. *Lake Wobegon Days*. USA: Penguin Books. 1985.

