

September 10, 2017

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Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

This Day Shall Be a Day of Remembrance

“This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.” This day is Rally Day, the day we change the worship time to 10:30—you all remembered! This day we welcome back the choir, and kick off the new Sunday School year, a day to call everyone back to eat breakfast, sing, (lots of singing today!) get ready to learn, be here. Summer’s over. Come to church. See what autumn holds here.

It’s a special fall, after all, this 2017, a once-in-a-half a millennium opportunity. This fall this church, and Lutherans throughout the world, and not just Lutherans, this fall Christians of all kinds are remembering a significant day. As you may have heard or seen (our Learning Team has done an impressive job highlighting this), this fall we commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. The Reformation was a momentous shift in the institutional church, in Western Christianity, and in European history, maybe was the beginning of modernity. As with all historical, social, epochal shifts, the Reformation took place over time, it didn’t all commence in one day. But it’s helpful, it’s a start, to name a specific event and date, and so we have October 31, 1517. “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.” It’s the day we remember a young Catholic, a man named Martin Luther, who loved the church so much he told it ninety-five ways it had things wrong. Luther wrote these ninety-five ways down, these ninety-five convictions, arguments, theses. Tradition says Luther then took a hammer and pounded them onto a church door.

There’s a door, as well, in today’s Old Testament reading. The door mentioned there doesn’t have a piece of paper pounded onto it, though, that door is covered with blood. “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you,” comes from a verse from Exodus, from the institution of the first Passover. Passover is a momentous holiday for Jewish people. Passover is a religious ritual, a special way of eating together that marks an epochal shift: when the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt and God came to the rescue. There was a long build up to the Exodus, there was misery, and plagues, we heard but a small portion of what happened today: we heard how to remember what happened, we heard God’s instructions on what to do: come together and eat a special meal to remember that God frees, do this, and become a holy people.

In Christ, this day is today; this meal is Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, a religious ritual that Jesus instituted on the night in which he was betrayed. As it happened, that night was during Passover. That’s when Jesus first gave those instructions that we follow today, at this table, as we come together, and take and eat; and drink; as we do this, to remember.

It’s a strange thing to do. It is strange to say, to hear, that a piece of bread is someone’s body, eat it; that this cup is blood shed for you, is for all if you to drink. But even before we get there in worship, it’s strange to hear about blood being spattered on door posts, about what kind of lamb that blood comes from, and how it has to do with striking down firstborn sons, and death passing over; it’s a strange story. We should note, too, that if you read through all of Luther’s ninety-five theses, you will find many of them strange.

But you are here. That makes you strange. These days, coming to church is a strange thing to do. If tomorrow you ask your co-workers, or classmates, or people on the train, or at the store, if you ask them, “How was church yesterday?” they might think you strange.

I think we strange people, church people, are just what our strange times need.

They're strange times, aren't they? These days I wake up in the morning and I wonder what the news will be: internationally, nationally, personally, I wonder. I wonder: are we in the midst of some epochal shift, historically, ecologically, socially? I hear how the US suicide rate is at a 30 year high, and estimates are that 1 in 10 Americans suffers from drug or alcohol addiction, and that 1 in 5 has a mental health condition. And these are not just statistics, not to me, they're not just numbers to which I am unrelated. Maybe you can relate to them, too. And I read about elementary and high schoolers, whom I've learned may be referred to as the iGeneration, because they came of age with the iPhone, a generation that includes my children. This generation, some say, is more connected technologically—and more isolated—than any generation before. And as they head off to college, another article said, today's young people find that they don't know how to deal with a loneliness and a helplessness for which technology did not prepare them—and which is all the more piercing.

Loneliness is not limited to the young, though, as people of all ages know, and our present isolation didn't commence all at once. You can't even say that it started this millennium. Sociologist Robert Putnam has been documenting since 1950 the decline of social capital in the United States, collecting myriad signs that mark a collapse of community, that Americans have become increasingly disconnected, disintegrated, divided. Putnam wrote a book about it, a book which is now almost twenty years old, and which has a memorable, evocative title. Putnam called it *Bowling Alone*. Once there were leagues, now there are loners. Bowling alone. Changing dynamics in bowling alleys is but a symptom and symbol. Once there was faith in institutions, now we suspect, avoid, distrust, deride them.

Or, we can reform them. Church, that's why we are here. That's why we come to church, and are a church. That's why God instituted the church. That's what God instructs, institutes us to do.

Like any and every institution, the church is imperfect. God says this, too, spells it right out in today's gospel, as Jesus gives instructions for how to deal with conflict in the church. Which is also to say, Jesus takes it for granted that if you are in a church you will experience grievance; there will be arguments. That's how churches come, not with batteries, but with conflict included.

But here's what else comes, where two or three are gathered in his name. You heard it, here's what else comes: Christ himself. We hear it in the gospel, God is with us, where two or three are gathered. And God is with us, here in bread and wine. And God is with us, in the cross, where a hammer pounded nails into hands and feet of a firstborn son, the lamb of God. God loves us so much that God put on a body, put on the Lord Jesus Christ—and put away darkness, forever, for us.

And so also God promises to take us, to take our bodies and to make us something else altogether, to make all members of a body, to re-member, to reform us.