

October 29, 2017 Reformation / Confirmation Sunday  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
John 8:31-36

### What Comes After

As I prepared to become a Lutheran pastor, I worked part time in a congregation—just like this year we have two seminary students working part time here with us in Irving Park. I worked in Hyde Park, with a Lutheran pastor who was near the end of his decades-long ministry. Much of it had been spent overseas, the last part was in Hyde Park's academic, university neighborhood. He was a good mentor. I remember when he got worked up about something his head would start to shake a little and his face would get red. And sometimes when he was preaching, if he was speaking of the great griefs in our world, you could hear his voice change, catch a choke in his throat, see that his eyes had an extra brightness to them, their brims were full. As they also were when he spoke of God's great mercies. He made faith, which can seem ephemeral, questionable, feel tangible, urgent, real.

I remember one episode in particular that made him shake his head: when the Campus Ministry program based out of that church adopted as its annual slogan these two words: "Sin Boldly." My old mentor did not like that as a Lutheran campus ministry slogan—even though it comes from Martin Luther himself, was something Luther wrote. But, as my mentor noted with flushed face, that's not what Luther was about, advocated: "Sin boldly." Luther wasn't launching a frat party (though he was fond of beer).

"Sin boldly" is something Luther wrote; it is an actual quote, but not a full quote. Cutting quotes short, not continuing with what comes after, can do grave injustice—as can ignorance of context. To understand what Luther meant you need to hear more of this quote, and hear where, and when and to whom he said it.

Luther wrote those words as part of a long letter to his colleague and close friend, Philip Melancthon. The year is 1521. Much has happened since the end of October 1517, the year and event that we commemorate today, when Luther's ninety five theses spread like wildfire from Wittenburg. In the years after 1517, Luther's preaching and writings have become widespread, become part of a revolutionary movement in theology and biblical literacy and ecclesiology—and Luther is at the forefront of it. For this he's been put on trial and excommunicated by the pope. Fearing for his safety, Luther's supporters have staged a fake kidnapping and hidden him away in a castle.

Some might find all of this, and this time in particular: holed away in a cold castle after being excommunicated, anxiety producing. Luther finds it as extra time on his hands and so translates the New Testament into German, in eleven weeks. That's the kind of guy he was.

Meanwhile, outside the castle, the movement continues, with complications. Along with massive external pressures there are mind-numbing internal tensions and many, many questions. With Luther out of sight the confusion and conflicts come to Luther's colleague, his right hand man, Philip Melancthon—who is made of different stuff than Luther. Melancthon is brilliant, maybe even more of a scholar than Luther, but he lacks Luther's force of personality. Melancthon is more comfortable in the halls of academia, and he has a more conciliatory disposition. He is tentative, nervous even, with a tendency towards compromise that can create more problems. Melancthon is now purportedly in charge, but he feels at a loss on how to lead, how to answer all these difficult questions. For these reasons, then and now, some people are

hard on him, but as another pastoral mentor of mine has said of Melanchthon, “We have to remember, it was his first Reformation.”<sup>1</sup>

Feeling paralyzed about what to do, knowing he will get some things wrong, any answer has and makes problems, Melanchthon writes a letter to Luther asking for guidance. Luther writes back. Luther has lots of advice, that’s the kind of guy he was, Luther offers long and not easy answers. Moreover, Luther says, whatever Melanchthon does will get things wrong in some way, will create new problems. Not because that is Melanchthon’s nature, because it is human nature. It is the human condition to make mistakes, to get things wrong, to mess things up. That’s Luther’s idea of a pep talk. That’s Luther being consoling.

It is, absolutely. Knowing failure is part of knowing grace, allows one to experience true consolation—which Luther offers in this letter. Noting that mistakes will be made, that as humans we cannot help but make them, we find ourselves mired in them, in a world of grief, Luther also writes this to Melanchthon, and to us, and I quote, “God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners.” That is, God does not save pretend sinners. God does not save those who might make mistakes. God saves those who do. God saves real sinners, real people, all of us.

Now that you have the context, hear the whole quote again, and hear what comes after: “God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and sin boldly, but let your trust in Christ be stronger [bolder] and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.” That’s the why and where of when Luther says “Sin boldly.” That’s the important part before the quote, and the crucial part that comes after.

There’s a lot that comes after. All of us. We come after. We are here five hundred years after, a day to mark, to commemorate. We’ve also messed things up. We began today’s worship service with Confession of sin. The Reformation also brought about much bloodshed and brokenness. Some words spoken by reformers, including Luther, require repentance. We confess this today, together with our own brokenness. Today is not a celebration of a schism, it is an anniversary of a movement that is still moving. In the past fifty years especially much has happened to heal divisions between Lutherans and Catholics. We celebrate this today; we celebrate the ongoing movement of the Spirit.

Especially today we celebrate the Spirit’s movement in ten young people who are about to stand before us and affirm their faith. What a day for your Confirmation: the Sunday we mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation! What a joy it has been to grow in faith with these young men and women! What a joy to get to know grace. I’m talking about the concept—and the person. What a joy to get to know Grace, and Ethan, Ben, Elena, Jack, Sylvia, Alyssa, Garrett, Jessie and John. What a joy to get to know each of you in tangible ways, over two plus years, each one of you distinctive, each one of you real. I’m the parent of one of you, I know how real you are—as I’m sure, do your parents. We all know how real we all are. God knows this too, God knows us completely, and loves us all utterly, urgently, absolutely.

Students, you may feel a bit nervous today. It is your first Confirmation. It is a day to remember and mark, but even more importantly—for you and for us all—is what comes after: the life of faith, life that is hope and strength and freedom. We rejoice with you in all that comes after, in the crucial part that comes after: we rejoice with you in Christ, who is the victor. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. David Lose, as told in the class *Preaching Law and Gospel*, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, D. Min program, 2012