

I am a Lutheran

I'm a Chicago Bears fan. So tomorrow could be a rough night for me. It's been a rough season already. But that's who I am. I'm also a veteran. I spent four years in the army. I'm an American even though I was born in Germany. I'm a pastor. I'm a husband. I'm a father. What are you? How you answer that question matters. The first thing to pop into your head says something about how you define yourself. We all label ourselves. We identify ourselves with the ideas behind those labels. Some labels are far more important than others. This afternoon, I hope you'll all join me in embracing one more crucial label: **I am a Lutheran.**

I.

And I say without even a hint of apology. Now, that doesn't mean that I've always done a good job of representing that fact. I remember someone asking me once, "Are you never wrong?" We were in the cafeteria of an army base in California. A friend of ours, a good Baptist, had covered his eyes to pray before lunch. The other soldier with us, a man that I had tried to share the gospel with on numerous occasions, asked me why I didn't pray before eating. I told him that I did, I just didn't make a big show of it, because Jesus talked about praying before God instead of praying before men. That's when he said, "Are you never wrong?" He was so offended that he refused to ever talk to me about faith again.

In my mind, I was trying to live to what it means to be Lutheran. But my friend saw a self-righteous attitude. I didn't do a good job that day. But my mistake was not in standing up for the truth. It was doing it in a way that seemed arrogant. We must understand the difference. A true Lutheran must be humble enough to know that he could be wrong. You haven't come here this afternoon to hear what Geoff Kieta thinks. You could find so many more worthwhile things to do. I am a Lutheran and that means that I must subject every thought, every teaching, every action as a pastor and even as a member to the word of God. Because every opinion I hold, every judgment call I make, every piece of practical wisdom I spout could be wrong.

But at the same time, I am a Lutheran and that means that I also know that I can be right. We live in an age that doesn't really think you can be objectively right when it comes to spiritual matters. The most that our society will allow is that you can be right about what's best for you. But don't force your opinions on anybody else. A number of years ago, in a previous congregation that I served, one of the elders made a joke about me running for president. I pointed out that that couldn't end well because the congregation posted my sermons online. It wouldn't take very long for someone to find a sermon where I said that Moslems or Jews are going to hell because they don't trust in Christ. It wouldn't be hard to find a sermon where I call homosexuality sin. It wouldn't be hard to find sermons where I say that Catholic or Methodist or Evangelical or liberal Christian teaching is just plain wrong. There is no greater religious offense in our world.

If it were up to us to figure God out and to sift through all the religious thoughts of all the centuries and find a path to him, then our world would be right in saying that we can't be right. But I am Lutheran. That means that I know better. I know that God has spoken to us. He has told us the one path to fellowship with him. And he did it in human language – Greek and Hebrew to be sure, but human, understandable, translatable words. He used nouns and verbs and grammar and syntax. And he did that so that we can understand him. Luther found the gospel because he searched the Scriptures. You and I have that gospel only as long as we search those same Scriptures. While it is absolutely true that we sinners can and will misunderstand what God says sometimes, it is also absolutely true that we can understand correctly what God says. We can find the truth and teach that truth and conform all our practices to that truth. There is nothing better that I can do for the flock that God called me to shepherd. **I am a Lutheran. That means that I believe in real, scriptural truth.**

II.

"You're a pessimist. I'm an optimist, that's all." Another soldier at another time on another army base said those words to me. This time, we were in Augsburg, Germany, just a few miles from the place where Christian Beyer read the Augsburg Confession to the emperor in 1530. We were talking about whether people were good. Of course, as a good Lutheran, I argued that we're sinful, that we can't possibly save ourselves, so we need Jesus. My friend saw that as just a reflection of my outlook on life. Like most people today, he believed that people are basically good. So he didn't need the Jesus I was offering. He wanted to make his own choices about life. Not coincidentally, this is also the friend who liked say, "I'm not an alcoholic. I'm a drunk.

Alcoholics go to meetings.” But he was an optimist, so drinking too much and sleeping around and fathering a daughter out of wedlock weren’t bad things, because they worked for him.

That’s what our society believes: people are basically good – except for Nazis and child molesters and people who commit hate crimes. But people are still basically good. And you can’t hold us to those standards of right and wrong in the Bible. There are no absolute standards of right and wrong. Society needs to evolve and choose for itself what’s right and wrong. But it can’t choose racism because that’s always wrong. It can’t choose homophobia because that’s always wrong. Even though there is no absolute standard of right and wrong, those things are wrong every time a society chooses them. But the things God calls wrong are open to debate.

Confused? Me too. The problem of course is that God does give us an absolute standard of right and wrong. But how well do we understand it? How willing are we to apply it to ourselves? We Lutherans believe in what we call the law as a mirror. You all learned that in catechism class, right? When a husband and a wife get all dressed up and go to a nice restaurant, one of the very last things that wife is going to do before she leaves is look in the mirror. Why? Because while she was putting on her make up, the phone rang or one of her kids interrupted her or her husband squeezed past her and she wants to make sure she didn’t accidentally draw a lipstick mustache that goes all the way up to her ear! You can’t see what your own face looks like. You need to look in a mirror. Spiritually speaking, we can’t see what we look like to God. So he gives us a mirror: the law.

The law says that we are filthy, that we’ve sinned in words and actions and thoughts and feelings. The law says that if you break just one commandment, you’re guilty of all of them. It says that even if you sin only in your heart, you’re still guilty. The law says we’re all guilty and we all deserve to go to hell. But then the gospel tells us something even more powerful: Jesus has set us free. Jesus was perfect. He could stare into that mirror all day long and never find a speck of sin. His perfect life counts for us. Jesus died and paid for all the sins of all the world. He took a firehose to the filth on our faces and blasted it all away. Jesus rose to tell us that we are forgiven, that we are holy and perfect in God’s sight – even though our hearts still tell us otherwise.

But you will never appreciate that gift if you think you’re a good person. You will never flee to Christ if you think you’ll get into heaven because you help the poor or because you’re a good parent or because you write a check to church every week. You cannot be a good Lutheran – you cannot be a good Christian which in the end is exactly the same thing – if you do not see your own sin. So God shows it to us.

And along the way, he reveals something else, too: our sin has destroyed the world we live in. We American Christians have spent a generation wringing our hands over the loss of our “Christian country.” I’m sorry, my friends, but the United States is not a Christian country and it never really was. The only Christian country is heaven. This world is dying. I am a Lutheran so I face that reality. Jesus said that if the world hated him, it’s going to hate us, too. I am a Lutheran, so I know that’s true. But Jesus also promised that he will deliver us. He promised that he will hear our prayers and watch over us here. He promised that he will strengthen us when the world attacks and give us wisdom that no one can contradict. He promised us that he will carry us through all the trials of this life and home to heaven. And then he promised that the day is coming when he will return and raise the dead, including us. Then he will remake this world. So we won’t have just a Christian country. We’ll have a Christian world, a world in which our hearts are perfect and in tune with God. Because I am a Lutheran, I don’t expect to see that world here. Jesus told us to expect war and persecution and pain and sorrow here. **I am a Lutheran. That means I’m looking forward to a new and better life.**

God taught us all that through a man who lived 500 years ago, when the gospel had been lost. That’s why we call ourselves Lutherans. But being a Lutheran does not mean we worship that man. I can remember coming home from a Reformation service one year and my father, who was raised Catholic, fumed all the way home about “that Lutheran saint!” I don’t remember the sermon, but apparently our pastor gave my dad the impression that we worship Luther. We don’t. I think Luther must have been a very difficult guy to work with. He was bombastic. He was crude – he’s famous for bathroom references in his writing. Scholars call them “scatological references” to keep regular people for understanding what they’re talking about. Luther was no saint, not in that sense, anyway. He was a saint in the same sense that you and I are. He knew his Savior. He trusted in Jesus to wash all his sins away. He taught the gospel and defended the gospel and spread the gospel because he understood that only through the blood of Christ will anyone reach heaven. I am a Lutheran because I am every bit as sinful and hard to live with as he was. I deserve to spend eternity in hell every bit as much as he did. I am just as saved by the blood of Christ. By the grace of God we are Lutherans. May he give us the strength to stand up and proclaim what that means here today and throughout the world. Amen.