

**Sermon on the occasion of the commemoration of the 500 years of the Reformation  
and 50 years of the foundation of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in  
Switzerland and in the Principality of Liechtenstein**

**Geneva, Switzerland, 10 September 2017**

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

What a joy to come together as we do today, to give thanks to God and seek further inspiration as we mark today the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. It is a fantastic opportunity to reflect upon the journey of Lutheran churches through five centuries, to learn the lessons from our common history, and to envision the journey that is ahead of us.

Indeed, what a beauty to see the diversity of people and their backgrounds coming together here, embodying in particularly strong ways that reformation is a global citizen today. It has moved on all over the world, it has taken roots and found new ways of expressing its message.

Of course, this beautiful diversity raises also the question: what is it that holds all of us together? What is our unity, in the face of all this diversity?

In our Lutheran tradition, we say it is a particular message that binds the church together. We consider it to capture the core of what God has come to reveal in Jesus Christ. In our classical theological terminology we call this message the justification by grace through faith.

It conveys to us that we are saved not because of who we are and what we do, but because of who God is and what God does. It frees us by pushing us away from self-righteousness, from fierce competition and their poisoning effects on both our own lives and our relationships. As people reconciled with God, the message of justification invites us to be reconciled with ourselves. It liberates us from all frantic anxiety in view of all what we are supposed to be, all what we need to deliver, and all what is expected from us, allowing us instead to become who God says we are: God's loved ones with their own beauty and dignity.

The Reformation Anniversary is a magnificent opportunity to reassert the preciousness of this message in the midst of our struggling world. Its pertinence hasn't eroded. It speaks today as it spoke 500 years ago, because it is a message that speaks to our human condition. One doesn't need to live in any special time, nor in any special place to be able to receive the good news of God who has chosen to set a tone of compassion, solidarity, justice and peace in our world. Hence, people need to continue hearing these news: there is a starting point and a context for life that doesn't begin with us, but begins with God through Christ, and stays there even if our life ends in human terms.

Let's not get busy at this anniversary explaining to the world how indispensable we are because of the great things we've done in the past. That shouldn't be our focus. Rather, let us remain busy with engaging humankind with this liberating message of Christ, which is entrusted to the church and which can make such a big difference in the life of individuals, and of this world at large: you're liberated by God's grace.

But there is more to say. The message of reformation also got traction because it spoke very powerfully to the perception that there were things being pushed into the marketplace, which didn't belong there. With his 95 thesis Luther questioned the very fact that something that had actually been given for free was suddenly becoming a commodity: forgiveness, life,

future.... How would you sell them, he asked, if they don't belong to you? With his objection, Luther fundamentally challenged the logics behind trade practices, and what they were doing to ordinary people.

Don't we also wonder today, what else and what next will become a commodity? Isn't the voracity of humankind and of the prevailing economic paradigm continuing to push people and resources into the realm of commercial transactions? Human beings are trafficked – refugees, women, children, as well as men, or their organs, all becoming commodities. Human Rights, this huge and important milestone of humankind that grants everybody a set of particular rights that are to be protected no matter the circumstances, are increasingly being subordinated to economic considerations. They are becoming secondary, because profit making is becoming primary.

I wish that churches in the tradition of Lutheran Reformation would remain sensitive to this specific dimension of the reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, thereby questioning the very notion that *everything* is tradable. "Not for sale" – is a tagline which we in the LWF have used for the Reformation Anniversary. It is an insight that springs from the liberating power of Christ's redeeming action. Today, it inspires us to address a trend that makes trade to become the sole driver of social, communal and political interaction. There is nothing wrong with trade. But left on its own and given unaccountable supremacy, that drive will continue eroding what God is otherwise inviting humankind to embark on: a conviviality of solidarity and compassion, of peace and justice. Because of this, it matters to us people of faith, how things are ordered in this world.

Connected to this is what the apostle Paul writes to the Galatians, our Epistle reading today, which offers another important dimension, to be highlighted. Paul is strong and adamant in reminding the community in Galatia that God's liberating action sets us free. Paul writes about this, because he is concerned about legalism creeping into the community of those who had heard earlier that there is actually no law that could save us. Paul is worried because he sees that being a slave or a free, a woman or a man, a Greek or a Jew, was becoming more important in the life of the community than God's redeeming action that addresses *all* as new people, all, with no exclusions, as a new community.

Already then, dear sisters and brothers, Paul was shocked by legalism, sexism and tribalism in the church – no reason, therefore, to shy away from addressing those same expressions to this very day. All of that should never come in the name of faith, neither then, in Galatia, nor today in all the many places into which the church has grown meanwhile.

Instead, Paul calls the church to keep together what belongs together: justification by grace through faith, and freedom. As we take the first steps into the next five hundred years, let us be steadfast on that principle: a church that preaches the gospel of justification, will always be a church that stands without hesitation for freedom: a church that will equip and empower believers to deal with their freedom, that will encourage and invite into the gift of freedom, instead of warning and cautioning against it. There is nothing wrong with freedom. To the contrary, the message of freedom is an integral part of the message of justification.

Yet, it is a special freedom. Because Christian freedom takes its lead from Christ's way of incarnation. It is a path that lead him to empty himself from what he was and could have been and what all he could have done, so as to become what God wanted him to be: a blessing, a brother, a companion in the joys and the pains of people and their lives. And thus a Redeemer and a King. That's the special profile of Christian freedom into which the Gospel invites us: it is an unselfish freedom. A freedom that sees the "I" in relationship to the "we", never cut off, or in isolation of it. It is a freedom with others and for others.

This stands in stark contrast to a prevailing way of embracing freedom today, particularly in our Western context, which explains much of the misery we observe in the world today. The “I” is just becoming too big, too absolute, too much of a stand-alone entity, incapable of connecting and relating, even of seeing the other. It sets its own compass of morality so as to continue claiming the big space it needs, over and against others. The “I” is increasingly losing its social competence.

Here, dear sisters and brothers, I see us growing in future as Lutheran churches, emphasizing what Christ came to reveal, and the apostle Paul captured so sharply: the freedom that Christ has acquired for us binds us to our neighbor, instead of detaching us from him or her. Freedom is about fulfilling God’s purposes, not our own.

This leads me then to the Gospel of today, the well-known story of the Good Samaritan, which brings the notion of the “neighbor” to our attention. To follow Christ’s path of incarnation will embark us always in a journey of meeting and serving new neighbors – this is the point Jesus wants to make with the parable. Let’s therefore do this confidently and joyfully. I’m sometimes surprised when I hear a concern that our eagerness to express faith by works would be a sort of works-righteousness! The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us another story: we should rather beware from the narcotic effect of indifference, or from a melting sense of solidarity. That is what undermines faith, not works of service as a response to God’s gift of salvation!

What the parable of the Good Samaritan reveals as well, is that there is a truth about the gospel of Jesus Christ, which can’t be confined into speeches, teachings and writings, nor can it be contained in them. Rather, this truth will be found out there, in the loving and compassionate service to the neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us how God speaks to us not only through books and texts, but also through encounters.

This is why the Joint Commemoration between Lutherans and Catholics last year in the Cathedral of Lund carries such a deep meaning and such a big promise: it was followed by the signature of a letter of intent to draw Catholics and Lutherans closer together as we serve people in need.

What a blessing that for the first time in five centuries, we are approaching the Reformation anniversary not from the perspective of proving how right we are and how wrong all the others are, but by spelling out how much we hold in common, and how much we long to be healed from the brokenness that affects us! And what a blessing, that we can truly expect God encountering us while engaging in deeper and more compassionate diaconal service.

Our times, however, seem to be calling for an approach that goes beyond the realm of human beings and of interpersonal relations to now include a deeper awareness about our relations to the whole of the created world. God didn’t only *create* human beings but the whole of the earth, of which we are part of. God didn’t only come to *save* human beings, but came to redeem creation as a whole. In times of tremendous ecological challenges, climate change being just one of them, we have the opportunity to develop a theology, sermons, catechism, songs that help us to grasp both the preciousness and the fragility of the web of relationships into which God has placed us. Churches do have a role here forging this new awareness, and bringing about the conversions that are needed so as to not further cutting us off from those links, but inserting us in them, and helping us to understand that though unborn, we are already bound together across generations.

No, Reformation is not over, because God’s mission is not over. God continues claiming space in our lives, inviting us to live from what is given to us. God continues to set us free from the anxiety of perfection, accomplishment and success, inviting us into a journey of

transformation to become who God wants us to be. God doesn't stop, God is alive. That's why Reformation is ongoing.

Your church, the BELK, is part of that ongoing reformation. It can't do it all, and it won't do it all. But it has its own distinctive contribution to make, as we engage as a global communion of churches, to carry forward what we have inherited and what is entrusted to us. No anxieties, no hesitations and no despair in view of size, availability of resources and human power. Let's not forget, here and elsewhere: we're the church that stands on the message that it is not because of who we are and what we do, but because of who God is and what God does that things happen in our world. Let's walk with this sense of joy and confidence into the next century, entrusting our being and doing into God's hands, the one who loved us – and the whole world! – first.

Amen.