

The Bethel Pulpit

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BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: John 8:31-36

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Backwards and forwards. As I think about today – as I think about this reading from the Gospel of John, as I think about it being Reformation Sunday and as I think about it also being Confirmation Sunday – it seems that those two words or more accurately, those two perspectives, are at the heart of what I want to talk about today.

Jesus is having a conversation in John's Gospel with some of his followers. They hear Jesus say, the truth will set you free and they take issue with that. They say, "Wait a minute Jesus, we have an identity – we are descendants of Abraham – and because of that identity we do not need you to set us free."

Well, Jesus challenges them and he calls them to change their perspective – to gain a new perspective, really – to stop looking backward, to turn, to look in a new direction – to look forward – and to claim a new identity as one of his followers/as one of his disciples.

Looking backward is something we cannot help but do on this Sunday. As we celebrate Reformation Sunday we cannot help but look backward to reflect on good old Martin Luther who posted his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church 501 years ago this coming Wednesday, essentially starting the Reformation. But Reformation is also a time of looking forward and wrestling with the idea of how we as the church today and tomorrow can continue to reform and change to deal with the realities and challenges of our current time and place.

And Confirmation Sunday is filled with backward looking moments by parents, grandparents, confirmation students, and pastors – moments of remembering and reflecting. And hopefully it is also a time of looking forward for each of those people to consider what is the next step on their journey of faith.

There is great purpose in looking backward and looking forward. We look backward to understand whom we are, where we came from, what we have done, what we have learned, how we got to where we are.

We look backward collectively to know and to be able to articulate our identity; and our identity is that we are part of the Body of Christ. We are the Body of Christ and we are living out that role here at Bethel

Lutheran Church in Madison, Wisconsin in 2018; that is who we are – that is our identity – that is why we look backward.

But our identity doesn't just keep us here – here at Bethel safe and sound and separated from other Christians and the rest of the world. Our identity as Children of God – as part of the Body of Christ – reminds us, guides us, calls us, pushes us outside of this comfortable space, connecting us with our sisters and brothers in faith next door and around the world and moving us into places that need to hear a word of hope, love, grace, mercy and forgiveness. Our identity that we claim as we look backward, gives us a perspective as we look forward.

If you have ever been on a confirmation retreat with me at Bethel Horizons you will know that one of the things that we always do is a work project – regardless of the weather or whatever else we have planned, we always do a work project. In fact, typically we do a two or three work projects. If that sounds good – we have still have space available for our Fall Confirmation Retreat next weekend. I find that by doing these work projects something wonderful takes place - the group becomes more cohesive – it bonds; in the midst of lifting, hauling, cutting, pulling, pushing, cleaning, digging, raking, sweating, and a tiny, almost inconsequential bit of complaining, the group makes a connection with one another.

But there is another reason why work projects are so important to me – it is because of my Dad. Each spring and fall during the years that I was in middle school, high school and even into college, my Dad would set aside one Saturday where he would "ask" my brother, Erick, and me to help him work in our yard in an effort to get ready for the summer or the winter.

We had a large back yard, so those days began early in the morning and continued until the sun was nearly down. The work varied – sometimes it was raking leaves, other times it was cutting down trees, or building garden beds or compost heaps, usually mowing the lawn was part of the work and planting and replanting bulbs and flowers were also frequent tasks. Whatever the job happened to be, it was guaranteed that the three of us worked very hard.

And at the end of the day, as we were cleaning our tools because our work was finally done, my Dad would say, "We have one more task that we have to do –

we have to survey. Always remember to survey.”

Surveying for my Dad meant physically walking around the whole yard to see/to admire/to appreciate the work that we had just done. But in that experience – in that surveying – we not only looked backward at what we had just accomplished, we also looked forward – we began considering the work that we might want to accomplish in the future.

Always remember to survey. Look backward and look forward. As we do that, as we look back at our lives we can at times see more clearly the possibility of God – the reality of God – but not in some abstract other-worldly way. Instead, we can at times see the possibility and the reality of God functioning in our lives.

As we survey our lives – as we look backwards – we hopefully see and understand the guiding hand of God that has brought us to where we are today. That lenses that we look through as we survey our lives – as we look backwards – is the lens of faith; it is a lens that can become clouded and marred by doubt, fear, anger and many other things, still it is a lens that allows us to see the possibility of God – the reality of God – functioning in our lives as well.

Today is really special at Bethel because not only are we confirming 11 young women and men at the 9 am service, we are also baptizing a baby at the 11:15 service. The confirmation service is also called the affirmation of baptism service because at that/this service those who are getting confirmed are essentially saying yes to their baptism.

A part of what we do at both the baptismal service and the affirmation of baptism service is to look backwards.

Listen to one of the prayers that we say at each baptism, *We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your Word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight. Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family, and through the sea you led your people Israel from slavery into freedom. At the river your son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit. By the baptism of Jesus' death and resurrection you set us free from the power of sin and death and raise us up to live in you.*

In this prayer we look backwards and remember how God has revealed his love and grace to our ancestors and at the same time we remember God's steadfast love for us and how that love has been manifested and revealed to us in our lives.

Looking backward, then, has a religious purpose. We look backward to witness to the faith of those who have come before us and the faithfulness of God; we look backward to help create a solid foundation for our

individual lives; we look backward so that we understand where we came from and hopefully get a clearer picture of where we are going. And for at least some of us – those of us who are a bit older than those/these 14 and 15-year olds who will be getting confirmed, we look backward to simply marvel at the wonderful gift of life, a gift that God has so graciously given us.

But this looking backward does us little good, if we do not then turn and look forward. A portion of the affirmation of baptism service asks those preparing to affirm their baptism a series of questions,

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism?

- to live among God's faithful people; to hear his Word and share in his supper; to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus; and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

These are forward looking questions. They are questions we will ask our confirmands in just a little while/few minutes, but they are questions for each of us.

Together we are called to look forward and see how we can continue to live and stay connected as people of God in the communities in which we live. How do we hear and respond to God's word and sacraments; how do we dive into this and all the other communities that we are connected to in loving and gracious ways with a word of hope and love; how do we serve others and seek justice and peace in a world that is overwhelmed with hatred and war?

When we look backward and forward we gain perspective. We also understand our identity more clearly. We know that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We are part of something even bigger than Bethel Lutheran Church. This backward and forward looking helps us see the world and our place in it.

God has called each of us to be something wonderfully special in this world. God has called us to walk out of this place today to be Jesus to the world. That is a huge task and a great challenge – it is frightening, overwhelming, intimidating – but it is also a great privilege and an incredible joy.

The Saturday before Confirmation Sunday is, for me, one of the best days of the entire year at Bethel. On that day we have the Faith Statement Presentations in Borgwardt Hall. Each of our confirmation students presents his or her faith statement project. Yesterday, like every other Saturday that we have done this, I was absolutely blown away. The wisdom, the faithfulness, the insights, the compassion, the grace that was shared by these confirmands was remarkable. It was a true privilege to hear what they had to say.

If you have found yourself a bit frustrated in the midst of this transition time here at Bethel, do yourself a favor – get to know some of our young people. Figure out a way to get involved – you will not be disappointed – because they are incredible! And let me tell you, they, in their own ways, are being Jesus in their parts of the world. May we, who are definitely older and supposedly wiser, do the same in ours. Amen.